THE HOUSE OF HALLIWELL

Mrs HENRY WOOD

THE HOUSE OF HALLIWELL



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THE HOUSE OF HALLIWELL

A NOVEL

BY

MRS. HENRY WOOD

AUTHOR OF

"EAST LYNNE," "THE CHANNINGS," "JOHNNY LUDLOW," ETC.

ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY-THIRD THOUSAND

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PREFACE.

"THE HOUSE OF HALLIWELL" is the earliest of Mrs. Henry Wood's works. Though not published until after her death, it was written some years before "EAST LYNNE." If it does not possess the matured power of the Author—impossible in a first effort—it shows much of the freshness and realistic force of the succeeding novels: qualities making the scenes of those novels dramas in which we are actually taking part, whose characters are people of flesh and blood, moving and having their being in the common round of daily life—our own personal friends, whose fate and fortune closely concern us.

As the *Athenæum* has said: "The power to draw minutely each character with characteristic individuality in word and action is Mrs. Henry Wood's especial gift. This endows her pages with a vitality which carries the reader to the end, and leaves him with the feeling that the veil which in real life separates man from man has been raised, and that he has for once seen and known certain people as intimately as if he had been their Guardian Angel. This is a great fascination."

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THE HOUSE OF HALLIWELL.

BOOK THE FIRST.

CHAPTER I.

THE MAJOR: AND AUNT COPP.

A FAMILY party was gathered round the drawing-room fire in the house of Major Halliwell: a handsome residence situated in the village of Seaford, some twenty miles' distance from London. It was a fine, warm evening in the beginning of September, and there was little need of a fire; but the Major had passed some of his days in India, and always took to evening fires before any one else thought of them.

The Major was the chief representative of the name and House of Halliwell. A noble and renowned and loyal house it had been in its palmy days; but the earldom had become extinct in the early time of George the Third, and its descendants had since been dwindling down in the scale of grandeur. The Major's eldest girl was named after one who had been a heroine in her generation — the Lady Hester Halliwell, sister of the last Earl Halliwell. The Lady Hester had refused to marry, but had won fame and love for her good and noble and charitable deeds. Her

portrait was reverently hung in the Major's drawing-room, and its face certainly bore a remarkable resemblance to that of her namesake, the present Hester.

Major Halliwell was a good-natured, merry, somewhat easy-going man, who had made money in India, had sold out of the King's service, and come home to enjoy it. Then the Major married. He is a man, you see, of about six and sixty now, whilst his children are young. Mrs. Halliwell—who sits on the opposite side of the fire to the Major, and wears a grey satin gown—is a stately, handsome woman, with a thoughtful countenance. Five children remain out of a large family. Alfred, a fine young man of twenty; Hester, just eighteen, who does not seem inclined to be tall, but has the Lady Hester's grave, kindly face and reflective eye; Jane, who is not here to-night; Lucy, a merry girl of fifteen; and Mary, the youngest born.

When dusk came on, Mrs. Halliwell rang for lights. The servant who entered with them was turning to close the inside shutters and draw the crimson curtains, but Mary stood there.

"Wait a minute, John," said the child; "I want to see what that is at the gate."

The man being taller than the child, could see over the hedge at the foot of the garden. "It is the stage-coach, Miss Mary," he said.

"The stage coach!" echoed Alfred. "At our gate?"

Hester and Lucy followed him to the window. A lady, as far as they could see through the gate and the twilight, had stepped from the coach, and an enormous box was being taken down from the roof.

"Oh!" cried Mary, in delight; "suppose it is Jane come back for something! I hope it is."

"You little stupid!" retorted Alfred. "As if Jane would come back again!"

"That looks like a sea-chest," persisted Mary, "and Jane's——"

"I think it is Aunt Copp," interrupted Hester.

"Aunt Copp!" echoed the Major, springing to the window, whilst Alfred flew out to the gate.

He returned triumphantly, Aunt Copp on his arm; the guard, and John, and a man who was passing and volunteered help, followed, carrying the sea-chest.

"Aunt Copp," as she was universally called in the family, was the Major's only sister, but quite young enough to be his daughter. She was short and stout; a pale, round, complacent face, and black eyes. Their father, Colonel Halliwell, had likewise spent a large portion of his life in India; his son was born before he went there, his daughter after his return; and that was not for many, many years. Aunt Copp was a wonderful woman, positive and contradictory in manner, kind, like the Major, at heart, and so good-natured that people used to say she would give away her head if it were loose. She had been self-willed, not disobedient, in the matter of her marriage, and had wedded a sailor, a captain in the merchant service. The match, of course, was beneath her. She might have done so much better, every one told her. Of course she might, was her answer, had she chosen to do so, but she did not choose. She was wont to accompany Captain Copp on his voyages, and they had thought her absent on one now. They all gathered round her and took her things off, overwhelming her with questions, whilst Mrs. Halliwell ordered tea to be brought in.

"Where and when did you land?" inquired her brother.

"Got into Liverpool three days ago. An eight months' run we have had of it home; contrary winds all the way."

"Where from last?"

"China," returned Aunt Copp. "Brought in a cargo of tea. Right glad was I to touch land, for young Sam was getting worse than a monkey on board, climbing up the rigging, and holding on by one foot, and the more I called to him the more he'd stop there. He has learned to swear: you should hear him."

"I advised you not to take him," said the Major.

"I wish we had not taken him. But the Captain would, and I would; and there's an end of it. As soon as we landed, I inquired for a good, sharp boarding-school, and heard of two. I took my young gentleman to an outfitter's, rigged him out, clapped him into a postchaise, and drove him off to the nearest."

"Without inquiries or references?" demanded Mrs. Halliwell.

"What's the good of them?" asked Aunt Copp. "I saw it was a respectable place, with forty boys in it. They live well, and that's the chief thing: plenty of good roast meat and pudding, for I saw the lads at dinner. Sixty pounds a year, and seventy if he stays the holidays. The master asked me what he was to be, and young Sam spoke up for himself, as bold as possible. 'A sailor,' said he; 'and it's no use mamma saying I shan't be.'"

"You cannot expect him to choose anything else, Rebecca," cried the Major, "after letting him taste salt water for eighteen months."

"As good take to salt water as stop where there's nothing but fresh," replied Mrs. Copp; "only I don't say so before young Sam. We don't have half the bother at sea that you do on land."

"Where have you left the Captain?"

"With the ship. She wants a deal of overhauling, and of course old Sam must be in the midst of it, or it wouldn't be him. Six or eight weeks the men will be about it, and

the Captain busier than they all the time. Children, I have brought you all a present from China; seven presents have I got locked up in my chest. If it had not been for those presents, I don't know that I should have dragged the chest here; a regular fight I had with the guard about bringing it."

"There are not seven of them now, Rebecca," said Major Halliwell, dropping his voice.

"No! Where are they, then?"

"Two are taken, and one we lost to-day—in a different manner."

"Bless my heart!" ejaculated Mrs. Copp, the latter part of the sentence rendering her oblivious of the former. "Lost one to-day! How?"

"Jane was married this morning."

Aunt Copp's mouth opened with astonishment, and she looked from one to the other. "Married! Jane Halliwell! Your daughter Jane?"

"And there's such a splendid wedding-cake," cried Mary.

"Then, Major, I can only think you and Mrs. Halliwell have both lost your senses. A little thing like Jane! Why, she was in short frocks when I left."

"That is two years ago, Aunt Copp," interposed Hester.

"Jane is young, too young," sighed Mrs. Halliwell. "She was seventeen last week. But Mr. Pepper to whom she was engaged was going out to India, and wished to take her with him. Had we refused, they might have worn out their lives waiting for each other."

"I should have refused," said Aunt Copp, positively; "and boxed Jane's ears for thinking of such a thing. I only wish I had been at home. Who has she married?"

"Lieutenant Pepper. A very worthy and delightful young man."

"Possesses nothing, of course," growled Aunt Copp, "but his pay and his uniform."

"Indeed, he does," laughed the Major; "he made a very fair settlement on Jane."

"I don't care," persisted Aunt Copp. "If he had settled all Calcutta and the Ganges on her, she ought not to have married. Throwing a child like that on Indian society with no one to look after her!"

"I do not fear for Jane," said Mrs. Halliwell. "We did propose that they should wait for a year or two, and Mr. Pepper proceed without her; but he was much against it, and——"

"To be sure," interrupted Aunt Copp. "Children are against taking physic, but it's good for them."

"I am glad we did not separate them," said Mrs. Halliwell, musingly. "Those delayed marriages are so frequently frustrated for good. Had it turned out so in this case, Jane might have blamed us all her life."

"Well, it's done, and it can't be undone," concluded Aunt Copp. "How can I send Jane's present after her?"

"Don't attempt it," advised the Major. "They sail at the end of the week, and Jane has a van-load of fine things as it is. Give it to Hester instead."

"I must say one thing," resumed Mrs. Copp, "that, for a wedding-day, you are desperately quiet. I never heard of such a thing as remaining quietly at home, with not a soul but yourselves. When I was married, girls, we had a ball in the evening, and I and my husband, your Uncle Sam, stopped and opened it."

"We said we had lost two children besides Jane," said Mrs. Halliwell, in a half-whisper. "We have only thrown off our mourning for to-day, and shall resume it to-morrow. How could we have any rejoicing?"

"Tell me about it," said Mrs. Copp.

"It was darling little James and Frederick," answered Lucy, with tears in her eyes. "They died last May."

"Both died?"

"Both. Only two days apart from each other."

"My patience! Poor little dears. What was it?"

"Scarlet fever," cried the Major; "it was raging in the neighbourhood, and the three young ones took it. Mary recovered, but the poor boys died."

"Ah!" groaned Aunt Copp, "that was bad management. I wish I had been at home. What doctors did you have?"

"Mr. Davis, the medical man here. They were only ill, one four, the other five days."

"I tell you, then, it was bad management took those boys, and nothing else."

"I think it was not quite that," sighed Mrs. Halliwell.

"What else, pray?" snapped Aunt Copp.

"God's will."

"Aunt Copp," whispered Hester, later in the evening, "will you not tell our fortunes? You know you never would."

"Because, child, I have told some that have come true, and then folk have turned round and blamed me for frightening them."

"I shall not blame you. I wish you would tell mine. Do. We ought to have some fun this evening."

"If I tell you bad luck, you will not call it fun."

"Oh yes, I shall."

"You will promise to stand it, without being afraid?"

"That I will," laughed Hester.

"Well, get the cards then. I suppose it is allowable, Major?"

"Allowable! such trash as that! You may tell them all night, if you like."

"If you can really find amusement in anything so nonsensical," added Mrs. Halliwell, with an imperceptible curl of the lip.

"Do not ridicule too soon," replied Aunt Copp. "Shuffle and cut the cards, Hester."

"Shuffle well, Hester," said her brother, as he leaned over Aunt Copp's chair and laughed. "Let us hear what sort of a husband you are to have."

"Hollo, Master Alfred," broke in the Major, with a comical expression of countenance; "a staunch Churchman, as you are to be, has no business to watch the dealings of the black art. When you come to be ordained, how will you face your bishop, sir?"

"Major," interrupted Mrs. Copp, "you will oblige me by not talking."

"Silence all," cried the Major. "Children, we are in the hands of an unknown power."

"Well," exclaimed one of them impatiently, as Aunt Copp's process appeared to grow rather tedious, "what is Hester's fortune?"

"Hester, child, it is nothing good," said Aunt Copp. "Shall I tell it you?"

"Oh, please do," laughed Hester.

"Well then, child, to begin with, you will not have a husband at all. You'll be pretty near it, but somehow it will slip away, and you'll never marry."

"What a dreadful thing!" uttered Lucy, with a long face. "I will not have mine told."

"I don't know that Hester will care much about it, though," resumed Aunt Copp, her eyes following the cards. "For it seems as if you would be in the midst of business, child, all your life; the business of others: some good, some bad. I should say you would be full of usefulness, my dear, so console yourself."

"Ay, do console yourself, Hester," mocked the Major. "I hope you will be able to sleep to-night."

Mrs. Copp was nettled. "You may make as much game as you like, James, but I know the cards tell true, and that Hester will be an old maid. You'll see."

"I shan't live to see," responded the Major; "it will be beyond my time. Hester, how many cats shall you keep?"

"Shall I tell yours?" exclaimed Mrs. Copp, with animation. "Come, Major; and then you will prove whether I tell true or not."

"Prove away!" laughed the Major. "Hand over the cards. Shuffle first, isn't it?"

Hester stole round the table and laid her hand on the pack. "Papa," she said, "do not have it done."

The Major turned and put on his spectacles to stare at her. "Why, Hester! you are never such a goose!"

"I do not believe in what Aunt Copp has told me, or care for it," was the remark of Hester. "But if she said anything bad to you, I might think of it."

"Be quiet, Hester," said Aunt Copp. "I'll tell him his fortune, and then he'll remember not to mock at me in future."

The Major nodded at his children, and they looked on with a smile. All, accepting Hester, who stood, grave and quiet, one arm folded over the other.

"If I did not know to the contrary," began Aunt Copp, studying the Major's "fortune" in the cards, as they were arrayed out before her, "I should say you were immersed in business, James. Here you are, you see, up to your eyes in worry."

"Ho, ho, ho!" laughed the Major. "Go on."

"I had rather not go on," replied Aunt Copp, after another pause. "It is the worst fortune I ever told in my life. Here's perplexity, disappointment, loss of money, not

only to you, but to all who surround you ; and there's something worse than that."

"Tell it out," cried the Major.

"Death," said Aunt Copp, solemnly, "and very speedy. It follows you ; it will follow you, place the cards as I may."

The Major laughed till his eyes watered. "Alfred, boy, run for a lawyer. I'll make my will without delay."

Aunt Copp pushed the cards together, and threw them on a side-table. "I am sorry I told it," she said.

"Look at Hester!" exclaimed Alfred, who was making merry of the whole thing, like his father. She was standing in the same position, every vestige of colour having forsaken her face. Mrs. Halliwell indignantly reproached her.

Hester aroused herself. "Mamma, I do not put any faith in it ; I don't know what made me look as I did. It is only nonsense."

"Of course it is," haughtily responded Mrs. Halliwell. "Take the keys, Hester, and send in the wine and the wedding-cake. Your aunt has not yet wished prosperity and happiness to Jane."

Hester took the keys, and departed on her errand. But her face was still white.

"Aunt Copp, where did you learn to tell fortunes?" demanded Lucy.

"On my first voyage to India, Lucy : that is, coming home. We had an Indian woman on board, an ayah, as they are called, who was nursing a sick lady, and I learnt it of her. She was a wonderful woman, and could tell fortunes in more ways than one. Everything she prophesied came true."

"Is it the way they do it in England?"

"Do what?" returned Mrs. Copp, sharply.

"That they tell fortunes on the cards in England," explained Lucy.

"Certainly not," indignantly replied Mrs. Copp. "As if I would trouble my head with such child's play as that."

Lucy coloured and hesitated. "Aunt Copp, does your way *always* tell true?"

Aunt Copp, in her turn, hesitated: it was a home question, after what she had just promised the Major. "I do not know that it always tells true, Lucy; it does sometimes. It is very rarely that I can be persuaded into telling a fortune. I was foolish to have been so persuaded to-night. What a magnificent wedding-cake!"

"It was when it was whole," laughed Mrs. Halliwell. "Jane took some of it with her for the voyage."

"For the voyage!" echoed Aunt Copp. "Ah! Jane is like a young bear, just now—all her sorrows to come: as she will find, when she is in the midst of sea-sickness. I know I wished the ship would go to the bottom and I, poor soul, with it, when I went my first voyage. Wedding-cake at sea!"

"I could eat wedding-cake even if I were ever so sea-sick," cried Lucy, hoping her mother was going to cut her a goodly slice then and there.

"Could you, my dear?" significantly returned Aunt Copp. "Major, how came you to let them sail at this season of the year? They will come in for all the equinoctial gales."

"Pepper could not choose his time. He had to go when he was ordered."

"Poor Jane! a fine sick bear's life she will have of it. I'd rather stand a hurricane than the winds of the equinox."

And, what with talking, drinking healths, and eating wedding-cake, the evening came to a close, and the young people retired.

CHAPTER II.

THE MAJOR'S INVESTMENT.

"Now for a bit of cosy chat all to ourselves, according to old custom," cried Aunt Copp, drawing her chair to the fire between Major and Mrs. Halliwell, and putting her feet on the fender. "What a good-looking young fellow Alfred grows!"

"He'll do," said Major Halliwell.

"Do! I should think his looks would do. Why in the world do you make a parson of him?"

"He did not like the army. And one could not put a Halliwell to trade."

"But a parson!" remonstrated Aunt Copp. "Poor creatures, if they do get into any little scrape or peccadillo, it must put such a weight of responsibility on their heads. And men are not saints all their lives long, parsons or no parsons."

"Oh, he will get along, just as other parsons do," laughed the Major.

"He is an excellently disposed lad," added Mrs. Halliwell, and has not a vice about him."

"Mothers always think that," responded Aunt Copp, in her provoking way. "I hope he'll get a good living: not one of your paltry starvation things, at a hundred a year."

"I expect to leave him something worth having, Rebecca," said the Major. "More than I once thought for."

"How's that?" cried Aunt Copp, pricking up her ears. "They'll have—now there are only five of them—four or five thousand each, I suppose."

"Double that, I hope," said the Major. "Your fortune-telling cards were not far out to-night, when they said I was up to my ears in business. I am not, but my money is."

"What on earth do you mean?" questioned Aunt Copp.

"I withdrew my money from the Funds about fourteen months ago, to invest it. It brings me in larger interest, and the capital—whenever I like to withdraw it—will also be doubled in the shape of a bonus."

"Invest it in what?" was the sharp question.

"In a Company. The Perpetual Aid Fire and Life Insurance Company."

Aunt Copp gazed at the Major. "What possessed you to do that? And you," she added, turning sharply round to Mrs. Halliwell, "how could you let him do it?"

"Did any one ever do a thing yet that you did not find fault with, Rebecca?" testily demanded the Major.

"Because I have my weather-eye open, and can see into things clearer than some folk," responded Aunt Copp. "Mrs. Halliwell, I say"—laying her hand on that lady's—"how came you to let James risk his children's money in this way?"

"If we must tell you the truth, Rebecca, I did not know of it until it was done," was the reply.

"If there's a nuisance in the world, it is for women to interfere in business matters," chimed in the Major. "It's what they don't understand, and they get worried and fidgety. I knew my wife would be afraid and say, 'Don't risk it;' so I just did it, and told her when it was all over."

Aunt Copp paused. "James," she resumed in a very grave tone, "if I were to tell you you have committed a sin in doing this you would not believe me?"

The Major whistled. "Just as much as I believed you when you told me I was going to die."

"What did you do it for?"

"To make more money, of course."

"You had plenty. Plenty for comfort, and a nice little fortune for each child after you."

"There is no law against making money, is there?"

"There is no law that will bring you up to be tried for it by judge and jury; but I know this, I'd rather be bound to the figure-head of our ship and be sent adrift in her without a helmsman, than I would wickedly risk the little money that belonged to my child. Do you suppose these reckless schemes don't bring their own punishment with them? Of course they do."

"That's right," cried the Major. "Go on, Becky."

"Suppose the thing fails, this precious fire company, where——"

"It's not going to fail," interrupted the Major; "it's paying heavy dividends."

"*Suppose* it fails," persisted Aunt Copp, "and the money disappears down Davy Jones's locker, you will have committed a crime against your own children. You will, James Halliwell."

"Rubbish!" answered the Major.

"And the children will pass their lives expiating your sin. I tell you, James, it is a sin; some may call it imprudence, but it is nothing less than sin: and they must struggle and fight their way through life, and so expiate it."

"It is time to go to bed," said the Major.

"Bed can wait. The very fact of your having to conceal the transaction from your wife ought to have proved to you that it was a piece of wrong-doing. When a man takes to deceiving his wife, good-bye to prosperity. Mrs. Halliwell,

tell me—had James consulted you about using the money, would you have consented ?"

"No," was the reply. "I should have dreaded the risk."

"Nor any other woman in her senses. You talk about women not understanding business, Major ; they are a great deal clearer-sighted than men. Now, do you know what you must do, James ?"

"Well ?"

"Go up to London without a day's delay, and take your money out of the fire. If you can't get the doubled capital, held out as a bait, take the single, and put it into the Funds again."

"Impossible," laughed the Major. "There must be three months' notice of withdrawal first."

"How much notice ?" returned Aunt Copp, in very sharp tones.

"Three months."

"Then give notice to-morrow, and take it out at the three months' end. Will you do this ?"

"Not if I know it, Becky. It pays me too good interest."

"Then just see if you don't repent it. And Heaven help your poor wronged children !"

The Major rose, stretched himself, and spoke good-humouredly : "You are brighter at sea than you are on land, Becky, think of it as you will. Good night ; pleasant dreams to you."

"Pleasant dreams to you, if your conscience will allow of them," retorted Aunt Copp. "Make him do it," she whispered to Mrs. Halliwell.

This was on the Tuesday. On the following Monday, as they were seated at breakfast, the Major said he was going to London.

"To do what I recommended?" asked Aunt Copp, eagerly.

"Not I," said the Major, while Mrs. Halliwell gave an almost imperceptible shake of the head as her sister-in-law glanced at her. "I am going for a few hours' pleasure. Will you go with me, Becky?"

"Not to-day," replied Mrs. Copp. "How do you go?"

"Harkaway coach. It leaves here at eleven, and gets back at nine. Alfred, when you have finished breakfast, you can run to the Wheatsheaf and secure me a place. Box seat, mind."

"You had better return inside," said Mrs. Halliwell to her husband.

"What for? A fine evening, as this will be!"

"If you once catch your winter's cough, you know there's no getting rid of it until spring."

"I am not likely to catch it in September, Jane," returned the Major. "Box seat, Alfred, both ways."

"We are breakfasting later than usual," remarked Lucy. "I shall be late at school."

"I don't know how it was," observed the Major; "I meant to be down earlier than usual this morning. And I did get up in time. But there were so many hindrances; first one thing went wrong, then another. I could not find my things, and the trousers I first put on were the wrong ones, and I had to change them. Then I managed to overturn my shaving water, wetted my stockings, which I had to change also, and wait for more water. Altogether I never was so long getting up before; first one delay and then another; there was no end to it."

"Major," cried Aunt Copp, "this will be an unlucky day to you."

"It will be what?" echoed the Major.

"An unlucky day. Those retardings, those apparent accidents, don't come for nothing. You will hear bad news, or be crossed in some way."

"You were cut out for a sailor's wife, with your superstitions," laughed the Major. "I suppose you would not sail on a Friday for the sea and all that's on it."

"There you are wrong, then, Major, for I think Friday just as good as any other day. Only my husband never sails on a Friday, out of deference to the prejudices of the crew. But I'll tell you what I would not do—not sail at all, if things went cross and contrary with me the first day of the voyage."

"Bravo!" said Major Halliwell.

"I was not superstitious by nature," returned Aunt Copp; "nobody less so. It has been forced on me by experience. You see, now, whether this day won't have something wrong about it, and tell me to-night. It almost seemed as though you ought not to dress; as though some unseen power would warn you not to get up and meet what lay before you."

"Well, London is before me to-day," returned the Major. "I'll look out for Mother Shipton's Prophecies in town, Becky, and bring them down with me. They'll just suit you."

About a quarter to eleven he wished them good morning, and strolled leisurely towards the Wheatsheaf, the starting-point of the Harkaway. In a few minutes however, they saw him coming back again, much more quickly than he had gone.

"What's up now?" cried Aunt Copp. "He has forgotten something. Just like him."

"Look here," cried the Major, turning himself round before the window, and displaying a large fracture in the sleeve of his coat.

"What a slashing rent!" exclaimed Aunt Copp. "How did you do that?"

"A nasty nail they had in the post of the horse-trough. I was leaning against it, watching the Harkaway load, and whilst talking to Gibbons I felt it tear."

"Shall I sew it up for you?" asked Aunt Copp.

"No, thank you. That's sea fashion. Land fashion is to change it for another. Hester, run upstairs, and bring me the coat you will find in the bottom drawer."

Hester soon brought it, and her father put it on. Mrs. Halliwell and Aunt Copp lamented over the rent.

"It must go to the tailor's," said the Major. "Send it this morning, Jane."

"I think I could do it just as neatly as the tailor, papa," said Hester. "Shall I try?"

"Ay, child. If you do it well, I'll give you five shillings." And Hester's eyes brightened at the prospect.

"Never was such a handy girl at her needle as that!" exclaimed Aunt Copp, looking at Hester. "She should see our cobbling on board."

"Good-bye, once again," cried the Major.

"Mind you bring the oysters with you," called out Mrs. Halliwell.

"And mind you come in time for supper," added Aunt Copp.

It was striking eleven, and Hester had begun her task, when they discerned the Major coming back again at full tilt.

"Well, if I ever knew such a thing as this!" ejaculated Aunt Copp, and she and Mrs. Halliwell ran out and met him halfway down the gravel walk.

"My pocket-book," panted the Major, "my pocket-book. I omitted to take it out of the coat. Fetch it, one of you. It is in the breast-pocket."

Mrs. Halliwell went back to the house, but Rebecca Copp laid her hand on her brother's shoulder.

"James, pray heed me for once. Do not go to-day. Stop at home, and go another day."

"In the name of wonder, what for?" demanded Major Halliwell. "I shall be in time."

"Don't you see how everything is conspiring to keep you here? It is already past eleven, and you have been hindered a dozen times in going. Pray take the warning."

"I never heard such rubbish in my life," cried the Major, almost irritably. "It is only fit for a child."

"It is not rubbish," earnestly persisted Aunt Copp. "There was a ship, the *Whirlpool*, started from the London Docks. Before she was well out of dock an accident happened to her rudder, and she had to put back for repair. Then she made a second start, dropped down to Gravesend, and went on. Before she reached Ramsgate a squall overtook her, damaged her rigging, and she had to put in there. Well, that was remedied, but it kept them three days—James, do listen; what's the use of being impatient? Away went the *Whirlpool* again, and reached Portsmouth, when it was discovered that an infectious fever had broken out on board. The passengers left the ship, she was fumigated, and in time many of them, not all, came on board again. *Not one* had died of the fever, but some of them had taken warning, and they said good-bye for ever to the *Whirlpool*. When she was ready to start, our ship was lying alongside her. My husband said to the captain, 'Wilson, you'll never get her safe to the other side.' 'I have my doubts I shan't,' answered Captain Wilson; 'it has been a bad beginning. Farewell, old comrade; we'll shake hands hearty, though it should be for the last time.' And it was the last time, James," added Mrs. Copp, solemnly; "the *Whirlpool* started on her voyage, and she never was heard of again."

Hester had drawn near and was listening, and Mrs. Halliwell now came running out with the pocket-book. The Major snatched it from her.

"Thank you, Jane," he said; "I must run for it."

He started off, but Mrs. Copp flew after him. "Major! James! for goodness' sake," she said, "don't go to-day; everything is against you. I could tell you many similar instances. The *Whirlpool* is only one amongst——"

"*Whirlpool* be hanged!" interrupted the Major. "I am not a sailor, Becky. Let go my coat-tails, or you'll have a fracture in them next. The coach is waiting for me."

"A wilful man must have his way," cried Aunt Copp, wrathfully. "Something will go wrong with him to-day, as sure as his name is James Halliwell. He will lose his pocket-book and all his money, or meet with some bad news in town, or make some fresh acquaintance that will lead to ill. It will be something. I know he ought not to have gone the journey. Come along, Hester; no good looking after him."

Aunt Copp returned towards the house as she spoke, and Hester slowly followed her. Presently, when they were seated at work, Alfred came running up the path, apparently in the height of enjoyment.

"You would have split your sides with laughing," he cried, springing to the window, "if you had seen the governor just now. When he got back, the coach was gone."

"Gone!" interrupted Aunt Copp.

"It was gone, and round the corner, and out of sight. So the Major was in a fix, and began calling the coachman unorthodox names. The butcher was standing at Gibbons's with his light cart, and he proposed to the Major to get in and they'd gallop on and catch it; and up he climbed, and

off they went, I hanging on behind to see the fun. You should have heard us all halloaing when we came in view of the Harkaway."

"Did you catch it?"

"It pulled up when it heard the row behind, and stopped for us. Jones was full of apologies, saying he had understood when Major Halliwell went off home the second time that he declined his place for that day. Wasn't the race fun!" added Alfred, swaying about with laughter. "I wish you had seen it."

"Then he is really gone?"

"Oh yes; he is gone. Wells had possession of the box-seat, but he got out of it for the governor."

"Now I just ask you, Mrs Halliwell, whether it does not seem that the Major *was not* to go?" demanded Aunt Copp, with emphasis. "Was not everything against it?"

"It does seem so," said Hester, looking up from her work, with a grave face. But Mrs. Halliwell only smiled, and Alfred ran off, saying something that they only half caught, about the superstitions of salt-water.

CHAPTER III.

THE END OF THE DAY.

THE day went on to evening. At half-past eight, the butler came in to lay the cloth for supper, that things might be in readiness for the Major and the oysters. Mary, of course, was in bed, and Lucy also went, for she had a bad headache, to which she was subject. Alfred had been out fishing, and was spending the evening at the house of one of his companions.

"What time do you say the coach gets in here?" demanded Aunt Copp.

"At a quarter to nine. And it never varies five minutes," said Mrs. Halliwell. "The Harkaway is the fastest coach we have, and the most regular. Of course, excepting the mail."

"It may be a little behind time to-night, ma'am," remarked John, "as it will have a heavy load. So many folks will be coming down to the fair."

"I suppose they will," answered his mistress.

"I was with you here at fair-time four years ago," observed Mrs. Copp, "and left the following day. Do you remember it?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Halliwell. "And poor little Frederick got the ring of a penny candlestick on his finger, and could not get it off again. Do you know, Rebecca, that finger was bad for four or five weeks. The ring had cut into the

flesh, and I suppose, poisoned it. I cannot imagine why they persist in holding this fair every September at Seaford. Little or no business is done at it, and it is only a resort for the idle. They have long talked of doing away with it, but it still goes on."

"Doing away with the fair, mamma!" exclaimed Hester. "I hope not. What would become of our fairings?"

The time went on to nine, and the Major had not arrived, and it went on again to half-past.

"How late it will be for supper!" exclaimed Aunt Copp. "Especially if we wait for the oysters to be opened."

"I think it will be better to take our supper at once of cold beef, and defer the oysters until to-morrow."

"Decidedly best," said Aunt Copp. "I'll ring for John."

They sat down to supper. "Where's Hester, I wonder?" cried Mrs. Halliwell.

Miss Hester is standing at the hall-door, ma'am," said John.

"Tell her we are waiting for her."

He went out and came back again. "Miss Hester says she don't want any supper, ma'am. I think she's listening for the coach."

"Rebecca," said Mrs. Halliwell, as the man left the room, "you have frightened Hester."

"Frightened her!"

"Prophesying ill-luck to her father to-day. You don't know how sensitive she is."

"Not she," answered Aunt Copp; "she is too sensible a girl to be sensitive. She has twice the sense that most girls have."

"Yes, she certainly has; but she is wonderfully sensitive with it. She has so much delicacy of feeling—so much imagination. I'm sure, if you could lay your hand on her heart now, you would feel it beating at a great rate; and

it will not cease till she sees her father safe at home again."

Aunt Copp went to the dining-room door. "Hester."

Hester came in. "Who called me?" she asked.

"What are you doing there, my dear?"

"Oh, nothing, Aunt Copp."

"You are listening for the coach, Hester," said her mother.

The colour flushed into Hester's face. "It cannot be long now, mamma."

"What a ridiculous idea of yours, Hester, to be standing there!" cried Aunt Copp. "As though you could hear the coach come up to the Wheatsheaf, all this way off."

"We do hear it, aunt, on a still night. And if the guard blows his horn, as he generally does, we can hear that in this room."

"Sit down, Hester," said Mrs. Halliwell, "and take your supper."

"Mamma, I could not eat anything, thank you. I am not at all hungry."

"Sit down and take your supper," added Aunt Copp, peremptorily. "What's the good of fretting yourself to fiddlestrings over that coach? It will come in all right. This beef is excellent."

Hester sat down and tried to eat, but she could not. This was Hester: if anything troubled her she could never eat: outwardly silent, inwardly agitated. Mrs. Halliwell glanced at her, and then across the table at Aunt Copp. The latter was looking at Hester.

"Leave it, leave it," said Mrs. Halliwell. "I see you do not want it." And Hester with a sigh of relief, laid down her knife and fork.

Mrs. Halliwell and her sister-in-law talked on cheerfully; first on one topic, then another; their minds evidently at

rest. Aunt Copp seemed to have forgotten her sombre prognostications of the morning, and Mrs. Halliwell had never had any. The clock was striking ten when a footstep was heard outside, on the gravel.

"Here he is!" triumphantly exclaimed Aunt Copp.

"That is Alfred's footstep," dissented Hester. "It is too light and quick for papa's. How fast he is running!"

Alfred burst into the room. "Mother! Aunt Copp! they are saying that something is wrong with the Harkaway."

"What is wrong with it?"

"No one seems to know. I only heard a word, and came on to tell you."

"Upset for a guinea!" cried Aunt Copp, "and he'll come home with his arm in a sling. He will believe me another time. Do look at Hester! If ever I saw such a girl!"

Hester's face had turned white and rigid. She stood with her hands clasped, but she spoke calmly.

"Mamma, I should like to go and hear what it is. Anything is better than suspense. Let me go."

"I'll go too," said Aunt Copp. "Where's that shawl I had on in the garden? Oh, here. Hester, here's your mamma's. Throw it over your shoulders."

They went rapidly down the walk, Alfred with them. Aunt Copp talked incessantly, but Hester never spoke. Before the Wheatsheaf inn five or six persons were gathered. Aunt Copp marched into the midst of them.

"How d'ye do, Mr. Gibbons? Has anything happened to the Harkaway?"

"Your servant, ma'am," answered the landlord. "We are afraid there has."

"Then you don't positively know it?"

"Ma'am, we have not heard anything; but the Harkaway never was an hour behind time before."

"I never knew it more than ten minutes out since it took to run," added the landlady, who wore a smart cap, with blue ribbons. "Jones is the best time-keeper on the road. There's one thing to be said—he is sure to have a good load to-night."

"He wouldn't be an hour out of his time for any load as ever went on the coach, he wouldn't," said the landlord.

"Will you please to walk into our private parlour, and sit down, ladies?" asked Mrs. Gibbons. "You are waiting for the Major?"

"I don't know but I will," said Aunt Copp, to whom all places were alike. "He——"

"Here it comes," interrupted one of the group.

"No, it don't," said the landlord, putting down his ear; "that ain't the rattle of the coach. It sounds more like Thorn's gig."

"Where's Thorn gone to to-day?" asked a spectator.

"Went over to Crummerton this afternoon, to look at some stock," chimed in the ostler.

A gig came rattling up to them, and pulled up. It contained Farmer Thorn and his bailiff. The landlord advanced before the farmer had time to speak.

"I say, Mr. Thorn, have you seen or heard aught of the Harkaway?"

"Yes, heard rather too much. Two glasses of ale, Mrs. Gibbons, please. It has met with a nasty accident."

"What accident?" roared a chorus of voices, Aunt Copp's the sharpest.

"It was overturned coming down Crummerton Hill. Nobody but a foolhardy man would have loaded it as Jones did to-night. He kept taking up on the road, and taking up, till they say he had six and twenty there, inside and out,

and a dreadful heap of luggage. I say he must have been making free with the tap. It was the weight that caused the accident; the horses could not bear up against it."

"What damage is done?"

"Well, some of the passengers are not hurt at all, and some, they say, are hurt badly. We drove up about five minutes after it had happened, and came on as quickly as we could to send Davis."

"Is he gone?"

Mr. Thorn nodded. "They had one doctor there, but the landlady was crying out for more, so I came and packed off Davis at once."

Hester stepped forward, speaking calmly. "Mr. Thorn, do you happen to know whether papa was one of those hurt?"

Mr. Thorn, who was raising his ale to his lips, paused and looked at her.

"Why—is not that one of the Miss Halliwells?"

"Yes," answered Hester.

"My dear, I never saw your papa. I did not know he was there."

"I don't think as the Major was there," interposed the bluff voice of the bailiff. "I never see him nor heered his name."

"He was sure to be there," said the landlord. "He took his place this morning to come back to-night."

"Did you see all the passengers?" inquired Alfred.

"No," said the farmer. "Three or four that were badly hurt they had carried in before we came up. One had his leg broken, they said, and Jones was insensible. The guard has got off scot-free. Some of the passengers are on the road, walking on here."

Mr. Thorn handed back his glass, his bailiff did the

same, and they drove on; but the farmer checked his horse suddenly, and called for Miss Halliwell.

"Don't alarm yourself, my dear," he said, in a kindly tone. "There are no lives lost. Remember that."

Aunt Copp would have stopped gossiping all night, waiting for the passengers who were advertised as being on the road; but Hester, in her inward agitation, drew her away.

"Aunt, I shall go on to Crummerton," she whispered.

"Nonsense, Hester!"

"I do not want you to go with me. I am not afraid of lonely roads to-night."

"It's three miles off," retorted Aunt Copp, "and not a single roadside house between here and there. The passengers will be up directly, Hester: you heard that man in the gig say they were coming. I dare say your papa will be one of them. He is an old soldier, and does not care for trifles."

"He said papa was *not* one of them," she answered. "Perhaps—perhaps—he may be one of those badly hurt. Oh, aunt! he may be dying for all we know!"

Aunt Copp was silent for a moment. "It may be as well to go," she said. "I have no bonnet; but my cap is substantial, and the night is warm. Alfred, run and tell your mamma what we have heard."

"I am going to Crummerton," answered Alfred.

"Now that's just because we are," irascibly cried Aunt Copp. "You know how impatiently your mother is waiting for news. We were to tell her the instant we knew anything."

"I did not know you were going to Crummerton," returned Alfred. "I shall certainly go."

"Well, run home first. Your long legs will soon catch us up. When your mother knows, she can do as she likes

about following. Tell her the man in the gig did not hear your father mentioned, so we are hoping he stayed in London."

It was a starlight night, and Mrs. Copp and Hester walked on without meeting a soul. About a mile beyond Seaford, they met a labouring man, running fast, who stared as he came up to them, but did not stop.

"Where are you going to?" demanded Aunt Copp. "What do you want?"

"What's that to you?" returned the man. "Mind your own business."

"Well, I'm sure!" ejaculated Aunt Copp. "You might keep a civil tongue in your head when a lady speaks to you."

"A lady!—Oh!" was the rejoinder. "I should say as it's civil enough for ladies as is abroad without their bonnets at night-time."

"How insolent! Hester, did you hear that? Your papa shall have him put in the stocks to-morrow. Do you know the fellow?"

Hester moved in front of her aunt. Girl as she was, agitated as she was, she possessed far more common sense. "Wait one instant," she said to the man; "I think you are John Cooper. You came to make hay this summer at Major Halliwell's."

"What if I did?" he returned.

"I am Miss Halliwell."

The man peered at her in the dusk.

"Papa—Major Halliwell—was coming home to-night on the Harkaway, and an accident has happened to it at Crummerton. We thought you might be running to get assistance for the passengers."

"Miss," said the man, taking off his hat, "I am sorry to have spoke so, and I ask your pardon. I never thought it could be ladies, and——"

"That is nothing," interrupted Hester; "you could not know us, of course. Were you going to Seaford for assistance?"

"I have not heered nothing about it, miss. My wife is took bad to-night, and I was a-running for the parish doctor."

"Oh, then we will not keep you. Good night."

"That's so much time lost," said Aunt Copp. "What a bear of a man!"

They sped on again. Now a high hedge was passed, now the turning to a lane, now a bit of weirdly dark road, where the trees met overhead. Alfred did not overtake them, and soon the sound of voices was heard.

"What can this be?" whispered Aunt Copp.

Hester did not need to echo it; her beating heart had told her. A turning in the road brought them in view of three men and a woman. Their eager eyes saw that Major Halliwell was not one of them.

"You are some of the passengers by the Harkaway," said Aunt Copp, meeting them. "Do you happen to know whether Major Halliwell was on it?"

They were all strangers, and did not know Major Halliwell, so could not answer the question.

"A merry gentleman with a bald head," said Aunt Copp. "Plum-coloured coat, and had a barrel of oysters with him."

"There was a barrel of oysters on the coach," cried the woman. "My elbow was sore with leaning on it. We was so wedged in together, such a lot of us! It was a shame. The driver ought to be 'prisoned for taking up so many passengers. We might just as well have lost our lives as not."

"He would probably be sitting on the box-seat," interposed Hester. "A gentleman of middle height and rather stout. Do you remember?"

"There was a gentleman something like that a-sitting by the coachman," observed one of the men. "He joked a good deal. I think he was one of those hurt and carried in."

They went on again. More hedges, more trees, more vistas of lonely lanes, and more dark night. Other voices were heard now, five or six more of the passengers. Hester recognized one and sprang towards him. It was the gamekeeper at Seaford Park—the servant left in charge, with his wife, during Lord Seaford's absence abroad.

"Wells," she said, "is papa hurt?"

"I'm afeared he is, miss," returned the man. "He were in front with Jones, and were throwed off, they say on his head."

"Was he sensible?" inquired Aunt Copp.

"No, ma'am. I was bringing you word now of the accident. The guard asked me to call with the news."

Hester strove to speak, but her pale lips refused at first to utter a sound. "Who is with him, Wells?"

"There was several hurt, miss, and two doctors is with them. Mr. Davis is one."

On they went again, and drew near to Crummerton. It was not a village. A few farm-houses were scattered in it far apart, and one inn stood by the roadside about halfway up the hill—a long, steep, winding hill, dangerous at all times, but especially so for a coach too heavily laden. Mrs. Copp and Hester began to ascend it in silence. As they neared the inn, Hester went to the opposite side and looked up at the windows. A light was burning in every room; but that betrayed nothing.

"Take care, Hester," called her aunt. "You'll be run over."

A post-chaise had come from the direction of Seaford, very quickly. The post-boy whipped up his horses and

would not let them slacken at the hill. It drew up at the inn-door, and Hester recognized it as coming from the Seaford Arms.

"Hester," exclaimed Aunt Copp, "I do believe it is your mamma."

It was so; and Alfred was with her. The four entered the house together, and the first person they met was Mr. Davis. He took Mrs. Halliwell's hand in silence. Hester glanced at the expression of his face, and her heart sank within her.

He led them into the room, and oh, how sad the scene that met them! Major Halliwell lay on the bed, not dead, but dying. He had never moved since the accident. He never would move again.

"Is there any hope?" whispered Aunt Copp to Mr. Davis.

"None whatever. By to-morrow morning he will be gone. The skull is fractured, and there are other injuries."

"May Heaven forgive him!" wailed Aunt Copp, as she sat down on a stool and burst into tears. "And he would not listen to me!"

The funeral was attended by half Seaford. The body had been taken home, after the inquest, and from there it was buried. Not only was Major Halliwell universally respected, but the circumstances of his death excited wide sympathy; and thus the village, unasked, followed his remains. The other passengers were recovering; even Jones, the coachman, was progressing favourably. The family were together the evening of the funeral, excepting Jane; she, poor thing, had sailed and knew nothing of the accident. A relative of the Major's, a Mr. Halliwell from Middlebury, a town lying towards the west of England, who had arrived for the funeral, was with them.

"I wish you could manage to remain a few days with us," Mrs. Halliwell was saying to him, in tearful tones. "There are many matters to attend to, and I am quite ignorant of business."

"I should only be too glad to do so, if it were possible," replied Mr. Halliwell. "But my late harvest is not in, and I have no one just now to take my place. Dean, my manager and bailiff, died, as I told you, only a fortnight ago, and Tom is not old enough to be of any use. The very hour we have got it in, I will return and render you any service in my power."

"There is one thing we seem to have forgotten," cried Aunt Copp, looking at her sister-in-law—"the will. Of course James made one."

"Oh yes, he made a will," answered Mrs. Halliwell. "I dare say it is in his bureau, with his private papers."

"I think it should be searched for," said Mr. Halliwell, "and read."

They rose and went upstairs, Mrs. Halliwell, her son, Aunt Copp, and their relative; leaving Hester, Lucy and the child in the sitting-room. Melancholy enough they looked, poor children, in their deep mourning. Hester had felt the terrible blow, perhaps, more than all; yet she had retained the calmest exterior. She was leaning now with her head on her hand, a contraction of pain on her brow.

"What would be the consequence if papa had not made a will?" inquired Lucy.

"Very little, I should think," was the absent reply of Hester. "I don't know what the law may permit in such a case, but I am sure none of us would take advantage one over the other."

Lucy looked up in surprise. "What advantage could we take? I do not understand."

The rest entered as she spoke, for the will had been speedily found. Mr. Halliwell proceeded to read it.

"This was made six years ago," said he, running his eyes over the date. "I suppose there is no later one?"

"That is his last will," said Mrs. Halliwell.

It was a perfectly just will, the will of an upright man. His wife was provided for, and his children were left equal shares, not one more than the other. Mr. Halliwell, as he folded it up, remarked that it was a just and good will.

"Of course," began Aunt Copp, "the first thing will be to withdraw the money from that fire company, and put it into the Funds again."

"Yes," said Mrs. Halliwell; "I should wish it done."

"What are you referring to?" inquired Mr. Halliwell.

"Oh, long since that will was made, my brother drew out his money and invested it in some fire insurance company," replied Aunt Copp; and her slighting tone appeared to almost throw reflection on the dead.

"All of it?"

"Every shilling. Excepting what was settled on the girls, which he couldn't touch: two thousand pounds. Five hundred pounds apiece, it will be, as Frances is dead and there are only four of them left."

"That comes to them at Mrs. Halliwell's death," observed Mr. Halliwell.

"Of course, at Mrs. Halliwell's death; not before," returned Aunt Copp. "Well, every shilling but that is in the fire company."

"It is quite safe," spoke up Mrs. Halliwell, "and pays excellent interest. Since it has been there our income has been half as large again."

"I do not like these sort of speculations," observed Mr. Halliwell.

"I hate them," added Aunt Copp, sharply.

"I would advise you to write to your lawyer immediately," he resumed to Mrs. Halliwell, "and let him give notice of the intended withdrawal of the money."

"I will do so," concluded Mrs. Halliwell.

Not one letter, but several, had to pass between the lawyer and Mrs. Halliwell. Fears were aroused. Something was wrong about the money or the company, and the lawyer could get at nothing satisfactory. Alfred went to London, Mrs. Halliwell went to London, Aunt Copp went to London, and they had to return as they went. In a few weeks, when Mr. Halliwell again visited them, the worst was known.

"It's all gone," was Aunt Copp's shrieking salutation as he entered the house.

"So you wrote me word," he answered, with a long face. "Can nothing be saved out of the wreck?—absolutely nothing?"

"Not the ghost of a sixpence," sobbed Aunt Copp; "the company has gone and made itself bankrupt, and a pretty state of things has come to light. Why, they have been going on, all the while, on nothing but credit—and the Major's money! How he could have been so taken in, I can't possibly imagine. A poor, credulous—— However, he is an angel now, so don't let us talk about it."

"Aunt Copp," said Hester, bursting into tears, "I cannot bear to hear you blame papa. He did it for the best."

"And a fine best it has turned out," said Aunt Copp, snappishly. "He always was a simpleton—don't frown, Hester. You cannot excuse such imprudence. What do you suppose is to become of you all?"

"We must try and support ourselves," answered Hester. "I must, I mean; Lucy and Mary are not old enough."

"Support a fiddlestick!" retorted Aunt Copp. "What are you all to live upon?—air? How is your mamma to keep house? How is Alfred to go to college?"

Hester put her hand to her brow.

"I do not see Mrs. Halliwell," interrupted their guest; "where is she?"

"In bed, of course," answered Aunt Copp; "and no wonder, after such a blow. Some people would have had an apoplectic seizure. Alfred is up in London again, but his going is of no earthly use. What assets do you suppose this precious company confessed to having, all told?"

"I don't know."

"One pound seventeen shillings and threepence farthing."

"They ought to be transported, those who had the management of it," returned Mr. Halliwell.

"Transported!" echoed Aunt Copp. "I should like to see them all hanging from our yard-arm."

"Had the Major any debts?"

"Oh no, thank goodness—nothing of that sort."

"And there is positively nothing left but that two thousand pounds settled on the girls?"

"Nothing else, excepting the furniture of this house, which is very old-fashioned. There may be a balance of a hundred pounds or so at the banker's after the funeral expenses have been paid."

"It is a very gloomy prospect," observed Mr. Halliwell. "Mrs. Halliwell cannot exist and keep the children upon the interest of two thousand pounds."

"Of course she can't, any more than I could steer our ship without a compass. Mark me, girls," added Aunt Copp, turning to her nieces, "you must make up your minds to years of struggle—if not to a life of it. I told your poor father that when a man wilfully and recklessly risked his money, punishment was sure to follow. The Major had a

comfortable income, but he grew dissatisfied, and thought he would speculate. There were two prospects before him : the one of undue wealth, gained quickly—more wealth than he could want ; the other, the loss of all he had, and ruin to his family. His eyes were fixed upon the wealth, and he forgot the risk—and so the loss has come. Now, children, such recklessness must be worked out ; it is the natural—ay, and the divine—order of things, that wrong and reckless doing must bring its consequences after it. Your poor, ill-judging father has gone, and upon you, through life, will these consequences fall."

In a little time, however, things began to look brighter. Not that there was any prospect of the recovery of the money ; that was irrevocably gone. Many years before, Major Halliwell had rendered a most essential service to the East India Company. He had not served under them, but it had fallen into his power to give them certain information of a valuable nature, and when they would have rewarded him he refused it. They communicated now with Mrs. Halliwell, and delicately informed her that a pension of two hundred a year would be paid her as long as she lived. Whether this was the private act of some two or three individuals, or whether it emanated from the Company, Mrs. Halliwell never knew. She thought the former, especially as her husband had been, up to the time of his death, upon terms of intimate friendship with two of its members. The news was a great relief to all ; but upon none did it act as it did on Aunt Copp. Her spirits went up like mercury, and she began to contrive and plan, saying she would see them all straight and settled before she left.

"Let me see," said she : "you will have about two hundred and seventy pounds a year. Well, you may live beautifully on that."

"Compared with what we feared we might have to exist

upon," said Mrs. Halliwell. "We may think now of Mr. Halliwell's generous offer to Alfred."

"What was that?" quickly asked Aunt Copp.

"I did not mention it; it appeared so impossible that we could avail ourselves of it. I was speaking of Alfred's great disappointment at not being able to return to Oxford, and Mr. Halliwell generously said that if there were a possibility of one-half being contributed towards his return, he would find the other half. So now, with great economy at home, children," she added to her daughters, "Alfred may keep his terms."

"Oh, mamma!" cried Hester, her face glowing, "let us live upon bread and cheese; pinch and screw in every possible way, so that Alfred may succeed. His heart is set upon being a clergyman."

"I think my favourite theory, my trust, my belief, better than yours, Rebecca," said Mrs. Halliwell.

"What is that?"

"That God takes care of the widow and the orphan. See how merciful He has been to us! You would contend that their father's risking his money must entail punishment on the children."

"I did not say they would be crushed by it," rapidly responded Aunt Copp. "Never thought of such a thing: never would believe such a thing. God takes better care of us all than we deserve. I said that reckless acting of James's would entail struggles and difficulties upon the children. And I know it will do so. It *must* work out its own retribution."

"The first thing to be done is to look out for a small house," resumed Mrs. Halliwell, quitting the subject. "We must leave this one."

"There's one at the Seaford end of the village that will just suit," cried Aunt Copp.

Seaford was a straggling and not very populous parish. People had fallen into the habit of calling only one end of the parish Seaford, and the other St. Jude's, because the new church, St. Jude's, was situated there.

"How do you know there is?" asked Mrs. Halliwell.

"Because I knew you must leave this, and have been keeping my eyes open. The rent is twenty-five pounds a year, and it's quite a nice house, fit for a gentleman's family whose means are limited. The back windows open on to a lovely little lawn and flower-beds, and there's a very good kitchen-garden beyond."

"I think Aunt Copp must mean Seaford Cottage," suggested Hester.

"Seaford Cottage; that's the very name. Won't it do, Mrs. Halliwell?"

"I really think it might do," answered Mrs. Halliwell. "I did not know it was to be let."

"Ah! what would you all do without me?" cried Aunt Copp. "If you take it, I'll stay with you until I have moved you into it, for you'd never get in without my help. You are all the greatest set of incapables on earth at business—excepting, perhaps, Hester; and she has had no experience as yet. And now I'll tell you what I have had running in my head. We shall be away about ten months this next voyage; let me take Mary with me. I'd say Lucy, but I think she'd better finish her education; she does not know of what use it may be to her; and Hester you'll want for sewing and many household matters. You'll find enough to do, I can tell you, with only one servant. It would be a change for Mary, and during that time she would be no expense to you in any way."

"You are extremely kind, Rebecca," said Mrs. Halliwell, with a smile; "but a ship is not a fitting place for a little girl. She would learn the ways of the sailors."

"And to swear, perhaps," added Lucy, "as our cousin Sam has learnt."

Aunt Copp was exceedingly nettled. "Do you think I can't take care of a child? I should not let her go climbing the ropes and mixing with the sailors, as Sam did."

"I think I must keep Mary at home," said Mrs. Halliwell, in her quiet way. "I could not part with her just now."

"You don't know what's good for her," returned Aunt Copp; "she is delicate, and a sea voyage would set her up for good. But as you please."

Seaford Cottage proved suitable, and Aunt Copp "settled them" into it before she left. In her own opinion, it was she who did everything; but the quiet usefulness and plain good sense of Hester effected more than she did. It appeared as though Hester had been made for usefulness. She had shown no talent for accomplishments. Music she learnt for a year, but she made no progress and it was given up. A taste for drawing she certainly had, but somehow she was never taught it; accomplishments in those days were as rare as they are common now. Lucy's education was being conducted on a higher scale. But Hester was great in domestic qualities—her comfortable economy, her clever needle, and, above all, her aptitude in a sick-room. Aunt Copp watched her with admiration, and gave her her share of praise when she was leaving them.

"I told you you'd be nothing but an old maid, my dear; but never mind, you will still be happy. A useful life brings its own reward with it—and that's what your life will be."

CHAPTER IV.

HESTER'S ROMANCE.

THE years went on in their quiet cottage until Alfred was of an age to be ordained. Lucy's education was well finished, and Mary's was progressing. Mrs. Pepper they heard from occasionally; she liked much an Oriental life, but two children born to her had died.

The last vacation before taking orders, when Alfred came home he brought a friend to spend it with him. The family had walked to meet the coach, and when it came, and Alfred jumped off it, a gentleman about his own age followed him.

"My friend George Archer," he said; "you have heard me speak of him. And you, George, have heard of my sisters. These are two of them, Hester and Lucy."

What a handsome man he was, this stranger! Tall, fair, gentlemanly; with a low, sweet voice and a winning manner. He often dwells in Hester's mind, as he looked that day, though so many, many years have since gone by.

Is like attracted by like? Rarely. No two persons could be much less alike in all ways than Hester and George Archer; and yet they were attracted to one another. He seemed formed to be one of the ornaments of the world, she to be of use: she was slight of figure, with a pleasant face and dark hair, but of beauty she had none; he was indeed one of the most attractive of men. Hester thought so then; and now that she can judge dispassionately, she thinks so

still. We must all have our romance in life, and Hester's had come for her before that vacation was over. He spoke at once to Mrs. Halliwell.

She had no objection to giving Hester to him, provided they would wait; but it seemed to her, she said, that they might have to wait for years. Hester's heart beat, and her colour went and came. Wait! if she waited till her hair was grey, what of that? To see each other occasionally, to be secure in each other's love, was not that sufficient bliss? She did not speak, but her colour deepened.

"Of course, my first year's curacy must be lived upon hope," said Mr. Archer, "but when that is over, why should luck not give me a living, as it does to other clergymen?"

"It does not always give one," observed Mrs. Halliwell. "And you have no interest."

"Neither interest nor fortune," returned Mr. Archer. "My father is dead, and the little that came to me has been spent upon my education. Something like Alfred."

"And Hester also has nothing. She will have five hundred pounds at my death; but, were that to happen to-morrow——"

"Oh, mamma!" interrupted Hester, "do not talk of that."

"My dear child, talking of my death will not hasten it. I was about to say that were the money at your command to-morrow, you could not marry upon it."

"Certainly not," said Mr. Archer. "I should be the last to take Hester from a good home unless I had one equally good to offer her. I trust it may be a better, whenever it shall come."

"We have been accustomed to a better, until the last few years—if by that may be understood a more wealthy one," said Mrs. Halliwell.

"Then I am to have her?" said George Archer.

"In prospective," answered Mrs. Halliwell, with a smile.

"And when you can show me a certainty of bread and cheese, you shall have her in reality."

Mrs. Halliwell was called from the room, and he threw his arms around Hester. "My darling, will you wait for me?"

Wait for him! Her glowing cheek told how willingly, though her lips were silent.

It had been long talked of, and was now recently arranged, that the good old rector of Seaford, Mr. Coomes, should take Alfred Halliwell as curate. He was growing feeble, and required one. The prospect of having Alfred close to them was delightful to his family, more especially to Mrs. Halliwell. It grew to be hinted that this plan might be changed: who first thought or spoke of it, Hester never knew; *she did not:* but it was whispered that instead of Alfred Halliwell being curate of Seaford, it should be George Archer. Mrs. Halliwell was startled. She did not like it, and spoke to Alfred; but he, light-hearted and good natured, was ready to sacrifice anything and everything for his friend and his favourite sister. Mrs. Halliwell could not openly remonstrate against it: her old-fashioned notions of the extreme courtesy due to her son's guest forbade it: but she spoke privately to Hester: and she thought the latter might have stopped it with a word. *That word Hester could not bring her heart to speak.* "Selfish! Selfish!" It is the reproach that has since clung to her conscience. Ay, and with reason.

"How Aunt Copp will be deceived, when she comes home and finds you are engaged!" exclaimed Lucy to her sister. "She will not crow so much over her fortune-telling, for the future. Hester, I do believe she will be quite angry. She is so fully persuaded that you are not to marry."

Hester smiled, a quiet smile of happiness.

The time came, and they were ordained together. Alfred

Halliwell was appointed to a curacy in a remote district of North Wales, and George Archer to Seaford.

He read himself in on the last Sunday in Lent, the day preceding Passion Week. Seaford Church stood about half-way between the village and the gates of Seaford Park. It was called the old church, in contradistinction to the new one, St. Jude's. It was a small, low, unpretending building, only one monument within it, and one important pew, and both belonged to the Earls of Seaford. As they walked into church that day, which will ever be one of those dwelling in Hester's memory, she did not look up, but saw by intuition that George Archer was in the reading-desk, and the rector in his pew. Mr. Coomes, for that day, was only one of the congregation.

He began the service and they stood up. It is one of the few remembered moments of agitation in Hester's life; her breath came fast, she saw nothing, and her face was white as the snow outside—for it was a very early Easter that year, and snow lay on the ground. In poor Hester's foolish fancy, she thought every one must be looking at her; as though the congregation, in their curiosity to look at and listen to him, regarded her! He had a persuasive voice, low and silvery, and though it did not tremble, he was certainly nervous in his new position, for his bright colour went and came.

When Hester gathered courage to look round, she forgot everything in astonishment. Against the wall, under the one monument, facing the side of the pulpit, was the square pew of the Seafords, with its brass rods and crimson curtains. During the four years they had gone to Seaford Church (previously they had attended St. Jude's), that pew had always been empty, and now it was occupied! Standing at the end was a young lady of singular beauty, just budding into womanhood; at the other end was a man of fifty, short,

but distinguished-looking, with wrinkled brow and grey hair; and standing between these two were four lads, of various ages, from ten to sixteen or seventeen. The girl's eyes were fixed on George Archer's face, and Hester could not take her gaze from hers. It was the sweetest face she had ever seen, with its exquisite features, its delicate bloom, and its dark, spiritual-looking eyes: it is the sweetest face that ever rises to her memory. Hester glanced round at the large pew behind her, near the door: it was filled with servants, some of them in the Seaford livery, and she knew then that it was Lord Seaford, his sons, and his daughter, Georgina.

Mr. Archer was to dine that day with the Halliwells, and Hester thought that he would accompany them home from church. But they had been in half an hour, and dinner was waiting to be served, when he entered. Lord Seaford had detained him in the vestry.

"I was surprised to see them," remarked Mrs. Halliwell. "They must have come down late last night. I thought they were not in England."

"They have been abroad for three years, Lord Seaford told me," said Mr. Archer.

"And they have not been here for much longer than that. I did not recognize one of the children, and scarcely Lord Seaford. Was he pleasant with you?"

"Very much so. He invited me to the castle, and said Lady Seaford would be glad to see me; but that she was a great invalid."

"A very fine family," resumed Mrs. Halliwell. "The daughter is strikingly beautiful."

"Is she?" said Mr. Archer.

"Did you not think so?"

"To tell you the truth," said he, smiling, "I was thinking more about myself, and the impression I made, than taking in any impression likely to be made on me. My

thoughts were running on whether I pleased Mr. Coomes and the congregation."

"I only trust Alfred will succeed as well," returned Mrs. Halliwell. "Was it your own sermon?"

"It was indeed," he said earnestly. "I have written many. I used to write them for practice at college."

Oh, those Sundays!—for Mrs. Halliwell generally invited him—their peaceful happiness and repose will never fade from Hester's memory. The intense, ecstatic sense of joy they reflected on her heart is a thing to be remembered in silence now, as it was borne in silence then.

They went to church that evening, and Hester attended better than in the morning; more courage had come to her. The Seafords were not there. After service Mr. Archer overtook them in the churchyard, and drew Hester's arm within his. Mrs. Halliwell expected him to walk with her; she was quite of the old school, and very strict with her daughters. However, she walked on with Lucy, and they followed, he pressing her hand in the dark night.

"Hester, dearest," he whispered, "shall I do?"

"Do?" she repeated, scarcely heeding what he meant, in her weight of happiness. For it was the first time they had walked familiarly together.

"Shall I do as a clergyman, think you? Shall I read and preach well enough for them?"

He knew he would—there was conscious triumph in his voice as he spoke; what need for Hester to give him her assurance? Yet she tried to speak a timid word of congratulation.

He clasped her closer to him, he held her hand with a warmer pressure, he halted in the narrow path, and, raising her face to his, kissed it lovingly.

"Oh, Hester, my dearest, how happy we are in each other!" he murmured; "how bright will be our future!"

Mrs. Halliwell called to them. Perhaps she missed the echo of their footsteps; perhaps she thought they were lingering too far behind.

"Mr. Archer, are you and Hester not walking slowly? It is very cold." So he raised his face from hers, and they went nearer to Mrs. Halliwell and Lucy.

"Oh!" cried poor Hester once, after the lapse of many years, "let me believe that he did indeed love me! I am an old woman now, and have struggled through a lonely life, carrying with me a bruised heart. But let me believe that my dream was real; that during its brief lasting, George Archer's love for me was pure and true."

The months passed on, and Alfred Halliwell fell ill in June. He had not been well ever since he went down to Wales. The weather, when he travelled, was severe, the place was bleak, and he wrote home that the cold seemed from the first to have affected his chest and settled there. In June he grew worse, and wanted his mother to go down to him.

"I must send you instead, Hester," said Mrs. Halliwell, after pondering over his letter.

The hot colour flushed into Hester's face, and she looked up to remonstrate. What! send her away miles and miles from Seaford, where she could never see *him*, hear his voice, or listen for his step! But a better feeling came over her, and the hasty words died away upon her lips: how could she refuse to go to her brother in his illness?

"Hester is thinking of Mr. Archer," laughed Lucy. "Now, Hester, don't deny it; I see it in your face. Look at it, mamma. She is indignant that any one should be so unfeeling as to banish her from Seaford."

"Hester must remember that she is, in a remote degree, the cause of this illness of Alfred's. Had he been curate

here, his indisposition would have been well attended to at first, and not suffered to get ahead."

Mrs. Halliwell's tone was mild and gentle, but Hester's conscience smote her. Lucy saw her downcast look.

"Mamma," she said, "let me go to Alfred instead of Hester."

Mrs. Halliwell shook her head. "It is not only that Hester is three years older than you, Lucy, but she has a steadiness of character and manner which you want. I can trust her to travel alone; you are too young and giddy."

"Why, you know we always said that Hester was cut out for an old maid, with her starched notions and sober ways," retorted Lucy, who was feeling angry. "I'm sure it is a mistake, her being married."

"A very good mistake," said Mrs. Halliwell, smiling.

So it was settled that Hester should visit Wales, and George Archer talked with her about his prospects the evening before her departure—talked sanguinely. They were sitting in the garden. He was indulging in a chimera, though neither thought it one then.

"Do not think me vain, Hester," he said, "if I tell you something I have never told you yet. Our approaching separation draws it from me."

She turned her grave but sweet dark eyes towards him.

"I believe that Lord and Lady Seaford have taken an extraordinary fancy to me. Something more than usual."

"I think they must have done so," answered Hester. "They had you with them so frequently during the fortnight of their stay."

"When they return here for the autumn—as they purpose doing—perhaps this liking for me may be improved to bring forth fruit," he went on. "He—Lord Seaford—may give me a living."

"Oh, George!" she exclaimed, "I think he is sure to do it. The idea never occurred to me before."

"The worst is, these men have so many calls upon their patronage," continued Mr. Archer. "If one place drops in, a dozen candidates are ready and waiting for it."

"Your uncle is a clergyman, George," proceeded Hester; "could he not help you to something?"

"You mean my Uncle Elliot. No, he could do nothing. His living is a good one, but he has a large family of his own. Clergymen can rarely help one another to preferment. If Lord Seaford will only take me in hand, I shall want no one else's help. I think he will do so."

"I am so glad you have told me. It will be something to dwell upon whilst I am away. There's mamma calling to us—that it is getting dark, and we are to come in."

He rose and strained her to him before they entered. "Mind you don't forget me whilst you are away," he whispered.

"No, no," she replied, dashing away a few tears from her eyes.

The Seafords had gone to town after Easter, for the season and for Lady Georgina's presentation. It was said that she bore away the palm of beauty at the drawing-room; that George IV., sated though he was with ladies' charms, had spoken publicly of her exceeding loveliness.

When Hester reached North Wales she found Alfred very ill; but what he chiefly wanted was care—he called it coddling. He lodged with a mining overseer and his wife, who were attentive to him, in their rough, free way, but who had no experience or idea of the cares and precautions necessary in illness. Hester's heart smote her when she saw the want of all comfort in the place, the contrast it presented to the home he would have had at Seaford.

However, what was to be done now was to get him well.

And Hester was one of those right and rare spirits who set themselves to make the best of present exigencies, to meet and grapple with whatever duties may arise. As it has pleased God, in His infinite wisdom, to allot to us all some especial talent (though many, in their carelessness, go to their lives' end and never find out their own), so Hester believed that her humble talent lay in being useful to others, particularly in nursing, tending and soothing the sick. She entered heartily on her task, and with the aid of warm weather, and another and a better Aid, she brought Alfred round again. By the end of August he was quite well, and she went back to Seaford.

It was a long journey: travelling in those days was not what it is now; but she halted at Shrewsbury. They had some distant acquaintances living there, of whom they knew little more than the name, but Mrs. Halliwell had written to ask them to receive Hester, which they did for a night, both going and returning. She left Shrewsbury early in the morning, and reached Seaford about eight in the evening.

She never doubted that George Archer would be waiting for her; but they came flocking round the coach-door, and he was not there. Mrs. Halliwell, Lucy and Mary. It was a lovely summer's night; the harvest moon was almost full; but a dark shadow seemed to have fallen on Hester's spirit.

She did not inquire after him — when the heart truly loves, it is always timid—yet they talked a great deal during the walk home, and at supper. Chiefly about Alfred: the situation of his home, the sort of people with whom he lived, his parish duties, and the family at Shrewsbury; it seemed that they never would tire of asking Hester questions, one after another. But when she and Lucy went up to their bedroom for the night, she put on an

indifferent manner, and inquired if they saw much of Mr. Archer.

"Not so much as when you were at home, of course," laughed Lucy, "his attraction was gone. And, latterly, very little indeed. Since the Seafords came, he is often with them. And he is reading with Lord Sale and Harry Seaford. They go to him every day."

"Are the Seafords at the castle, then?"

"They came down in July. Parliament rose early; the King went to Brighton, and all the grandees followed his example and left town. We get all the 'fashionable intelligence' here now, Hester."

"Did he know I was expected to-night?"

"The King?"

"Don't joke, Lucy," pleaded Hester, "I am tired. You know I meant Mr. Archer."

"Yes, he knew it. We met him this morning, and Mary told him, and I wonder he did not go with us to meet the coach. Perhaps he is dining at the castle; Lord Seaford asks him sometimes. Very dangerous to throw him into the society of that resplendent Lady Georgina."

"Dangerous?"

"Well, it would be so, I should say, if he were not cased round with your armour."

"How much more nonsense, Lucy? One of the rank and beauty of Georgina Seaford!"

"That's just it, her beauty," laughed Lucy. "I will defy the lowliest curate in the Church to be brought within its radius, and not be touched with it. Nevertheless, I suppose you will have your adorer here to-morrow morning, as constant as ever."

And he came. No one was in the room, and he clasped Hester to his breast and kissed her tenderly. Her two

months' absence were amply repaid by his looks and words of love.

"I hoped to have seen you last night," she whispered.

"So did I, Hester. I had been copying some music for Lady Georgina, and went to the castle with it, after dinner; and Lady Seaford, and some of them, kept me talking until past ten. I was thunderstruck when I took out my watch, for I did not think I had been there an hour."

In his coveted presence, with his tender words, his looks of love, how could Hester conjure up uneasy thoughts? And what had grated on her feelings in this last speech she drove away.

Mrs. Halliwell had made acquaintance with the housekeeper at the castle, a lady who had seen better days and was distantly connected with the Seafords, whose husband had also been a major in the army. Mrs. Stannard had taken tea with them occasionally, and it was from her Lucy received what she styled her "fashionable intelligence."

One morning, about a week after Hester's return, Mrs. Stannard called, and asked if she would like to go to the castle and teach English to little Ellen Seaford. This child, the youngest of the family, had a Swiss governess, but no one, just then, to teach her English. Lady Seaford was lamenting this in the hearing of Mrs. Stannard, and the latter thought of Miss Halliwell.

Hester was alarmed at the proposal. "I am not fitted to be a governess; I don't know anything; I never played a note of music," she breathlessly said.

"It is only for English, my dear," said Mrs. Stannard. "I am sure you must be quite competent to teach that. They don't want music or any other accomplishment. Your going to the castle for two or three hours a day

would be quite pastime, and you would be well paid for your trouble."

So it was decided that Hester should go, each day, from half-past two to five, to give Ellen Seaford English lessons. She entered on her duties the following Monday, and went up to the old castle with fear and trembling. She had no acquaintance whatever with the Seafords, and felt shy and nervous at going amongst them.

Lady Seaford was a tall, grand woman, quiet and reserved. None of her children resembled her, excepting Lord Sale. She was wrapped in a thick shawl, though the day was hot, and looked pale and ill. One day, in that first week, Georgina came into the room while the little girl was reading, and Hester rose to receive her.

"Don't let me disturb you," she said, in pleasant careless tones. "You are, of course, Miss Halliwell. Has my sister nearly finished reading?"

"Yes," interrupted Lady Ellen, shutting the book of her accord. "I have read a page, and that's quite enough. The words are hard, and I don't like it."

Hester knew that the child had not read half enough, but she doubted whether it was her place to differ from her, and at that early stage did not dare to do so. She stood in hesitation.

"Miss Halliwell," said Lady Georgina, bringing forward a huge portfolio, "do you know how to mount handscreens? Look at this pair which I have begun. I am not making a good thing of them. Can you help me? Mademoiselle knows no more about it than this child. Ellen, let my paintings alone."

As it happened, Hester did know something of the work. She had a natural taste for it, and for drawing. When a child, she would spend hours copying the landscapes on an old china tea-set, and any other pretty view that came in her

way. George Archer once found one of her old drawings, and kept it, saying he should keep it for ever. Poor Hester!

She told Georgina she believed she could assist her, but that Ellen had only just begun her studies.

"Oh, her studies are of no consequence for one day," remarked Lady Georgina, in peremptory tones. "Nelly dear, go to mademoiselle; my compliments, and I am monopolizing Miss Halliwell this afternoon."

The child left the room, glad to be dismissed. She disliked learning English, and had told Hester that her French lessons were much less difficult to her.

"Do you cut the gilt paper out on a trencher or with scissors?" asked Lady Georgina. "For the flowers, I mean."

Before Hester could answer, a merry-looking boy of fifteen, or rather more, looked into the room, and then sprang in. It was Harry Seaford.

"I say, Georgy, are you here? I have been all over the house after you. Who was to suppose you had turned school-girl again? What are you up to here?"

"Why do you ask?" inquired Lady Georgina, without raising her eyes from the screens.

"Papa wants to know if you mean to ride with him this afternoon, and he sent me to find you."

"No," she replied. "Tell papa it will be scarcely worth while, for I must begin to dress in an hour. And I am busy."

"You can go and tell him yourself, Madam Georgy. There's Wells with my pointer, and I want to catch him."

"Where is papa?"

"I don't know; in the library, or somewhere."

He had vaulted downstairs as he spoke, and Hester saw him tearing after the gamekeeper.

Lady Georgina left the room, Hester supposed to find her father. When she returned, she halted before a mirror that was let into the panel between the windows, and turned some of her flowing curls round her finger. Her sylph-like form, her fair neck and arms—for it was not the custom then for young ladies to have these covered, even in morning dress—her bright hair, her patrician features, their damask bloom, and the flash of conscious triumph lighting her eye! Very conscious of her fascinations was Georgina Seaford. She caught Hester's earnest gaze of admiration, and turned quickly round.

"What are you thinking about, Miss Halliwell?"

The question startled Hester. She supposed, in her timidity, that she must confess the truth, and stammered out her thoughts—that until she saw Lady Georgina she had not imagined it possible for any one to be so lovely.

"You must be given to flattery in this part of the world," was the young lady's answer, with a laugh and a blush of conscious vanity. "Another, here, has avowed the same to me, and I advised *him* not to come to the castle too often, if there were a danger that I should turn his head."

Who was that other? A painful conviction shot over Hester that it was George Archer.

Georgina Seaford seemed quite a creature of impulse, indulged and wilful. Before she had sat twenty minutes at this table, she put the drawings together, said it was stupid work, and they would go on with it another day. So Ellen came back again.

At five o'clock Hester was putting on her bonnet to leave, when Lady Georgina re-entered the room, in full dress. They were going out to dinner. An India muslin frock, with blue floss trimming, a blue band round her slender waist, with a pearl buckle, pearl side-combs in her

hair, a pearl necklace, and long white kid gloves. It was the mode of dress then—and a very pretty one.

"Nelly," she said to her sister, "I want you to give a message to the boys." And she bent down and whispered to the child.

"William or Harry?" asked the little girl aloud.

"Oh, Harry," replied Lady Georgina. "William would not trouble himself to remember."

She left the room again. What the purport of her whisper was, of course Hester did not know. Mademoiselle Berri, the Swiss governess, was in the room then, writing, and when Ellen ran to the window and knelt upon a chair to lean out of it, she left the table, pulled the child back, and said something in French—very fast, as it sounded to Hester, and the child replied equally fast. She could not understand their language, but it seemed to her that they were disputing.

"Miss Halliwell will hold me, then," said the little girl in English, "for I *will* look. I want to see Georgy get into the carriage. Please hold my frock, Miss Halliwell."

Hester grasped the child by the gathers of her buff gingham dress, and the governess began to talk to her. Hester laughed and shook her head.

"What does mademoiselle say?" she inquired of Lady Ellen.

"Oh, it's about a little girl she knew falling out of a window and breaking her *reins*. It is all a *conte*, you know; she says it to frighten me. What do you call *reins* in English? There's Georgy; she has on mamma's Indian shawl."

Hester bent forward over the head of the child. The bright curls of Lady Georgina were just flitting into the carriage, and something yellow gleamed from her shoulders. It was the Indian shawl. Lord Seaford stepped in

after her, and, following him, in evening dress and white cravat, went George Archer. Hester's heart stood still.

"I wish dear mamma was well enough to go out again," sighed the little girl. "Georgy has all the visiting now."

She remained looking after the carriage, and Hester remained holding her. They saw it sweep round to gain the broad drive of the park. Lord Seaford was seated by the side of his daughter, and *he* opposite to her.

CHAPTER V.

LADY GEORGINA.

Autumn and winter passed away, and it drew very close to the anniversary of the period when Mr. Archer first became curate. There was no outward change in his position with regard to Hester; to the few in the family confidence the Reverend George Archer was still the engaged lover of Miss Halliwell. But a change *had* come, and they both knew it.

It seemed that a barrier had been gradually and almost imperceptibly growing up between them. He was cold and absent in manner when with Hester, and his visits to Mrs. Halliwell's were less frequent. He appeared to be rising above his position, leaving Hester beneath him. Mr. Coomes was ailing, rarely accepted the dinner or evening invitations sent him, and since Lord Seaford's stay at the castle, much visiting had been going on. So the county gentlemen would say, "Then you will come and say grace for us, Archer," and he always went. It would sometimes happen when they were going a distance, as on this day, that Lord Seaford gave him a seat in his carriage; and he was often now a guest at the castle. It has been said that he was a handsome man; he was well-informed, elegant and refined; as a clergyman he was regarded as an equal by the society so much above him, and he was courted and caressed from many sides. Thus it was that he acquired a false estimation

of his own position, and ambitious pride obtained rule in his heart. But not for all this was he neglecting Hester. No, no; there was another and a deeper cause.

Easter was later this spring than the last, and when it was over the Seafords were to depart for town. Hester's duties at the castle would conclude on Thursday in Passion Week; and it may be mentioned in passing that, over and above the remuneration paid her, which was large, Lady Seaford pressed upon her a gold and ruby bracelet, which Mrs. Halliwell said must have cost a small fortune. But Lady Seaford had taken a great liking to Hester. Though she saw little of her, she had quickly discovered her innate nobleness of character. Hester has the bracelet still; but it is not fashioned as those worn now.

Thursday came, Hester's last day, and after their early dinner she set out to walk to the castle. A rumour had reached her that afternoon that Mr. Archer had thrown up his curacy. His year had been out three weeks, but he had agreed to remain on, waiting for something better, at a stipend of a hundred a year. Hester had been looking forward to the departure of the Seafords with a vague hope that the old, loving, confidential days might return; and now this rumour! It seemed as though there were to be no hope for her in this cruel world, and she sat down to the lessons of little Ellen Seaford as one in a troubled maze. Before they were over, Mademoiselle Berri came in and told the child to go to her mamma: some visitors had called who wished to see her.

"You will stay to take de thé wid me dis afternoon?" said mademoiselle, who had now made some progress in English.

"No, thank you," answered Hester. "My head aches, and I want to get home.'

"You cannot go till Madame la Comtesse has seen you:

she did say so. Ah, but it is triste in dis campagne! I have de headache too, wid it. I shall have de glad heart next week to quit it."

"You have always found it dull, mademoiselle?"

"As if any one was capable to find it anyting else! Except it is de Lady Georgina. And perhaps de Earl, wid his steward, and his shooting, and his af-fairs. But for de Lady Georgina, she does keep herself alive wid flirting, as she would anywhere. She is de regular flirt."

"But then she is so very beautiful."

"Eh bien, oui, if she would dress like one Christian. But de English don't know how; wid deir bare necks and deir curled hair. Dere is no race in de world who ought to put on clothes, Miss Halliwell, but de French women."

"Lady Georgina always looks well," sighed Hester. Was it a sigh of jealousy?

"For de fashions here, she do," answered mademoiselle, shrugging her shoulders. "But she has got de vanity! And not no mercy. She has turned de head of dat poor young minister, and——"

Something like a spasm caught Hester's throat. "Do you mean Mr. Archer?" she interrupted.

"To be sure. One can see dat his heart is breaking for her. And she leads him on—leads him on. I do tink she loves him one little bit—but I only whisper dis to you, my dear, for de Earl and de Comtesse would give me chivy if dey heard me. But when she has amused herself to her fancy, she will just laugh at him, and marry. It is her fiancé dat is de handsome man."

Hester's heart leaped into her mouth. "Is Georgina Seaford engaged?" she asked.

"You do seem surprised," cried the Frenchwoman. "She is to have Mr. Caudour. He is my Lord Caudour's eldest son, and is now abroad wid some of de embassies. Dat is

why he has never been here. He is some years older dan she, but it is de good *parti* for her, and dey will be married dis summer."

Mademoiselle talked on, thinking Hester listened, but she heard no more. A weight was taken from her heart. And yet, with what reason? For to couple a lowly curate with the Lady Georgina Seaford was ridiculously absurd, and her good sense told her so. She had to wait to see Lady Seaford; it was the evening she gave her the bracelet; and it was nearly six when she left the castle.

The evening is in her memory now. It was still and balmy, and the sun was drawing towards its setting. She took the path through the park, which was the shortest way, and, in hastening along the narrow footway where the trees hung thickly overhead, she came face to face with George Archer. He was going there to dinner: she saw it by his dress. He shook hands in a constrained manner, and then there was a silence between them, as there often had been of late. Some power—Hester has never thought it was her own—nerved her to speak.

"I wanted to see you. I am glad we have met. We heard this afternoon that you had given up your curacy. Is it so?"

"Yes," he answered, breaking off a switch from one of the trees, and beginning to strip it with the air of a man who knows not what he is about, whilst he kept his face turned from Hester.

"Then you have heard of another?" she said.

"I have accepted what may lead to something better than a curacy," he replied, tearing away at the stick. "The post of resident tutor to the young Seafords."

Was it a spasm, now, that fell on Hester's heart? Ay, one of ice. "Then you leave here; you go with them?" she faltered.

"When they leave next week I shall have to accompany them. We must temporarily part, Hester."

"Temporarily!" Calm as was Hester's general nature, there have been moments in her life when she has been goaded to vehemence. This was one of them. "Let us not part to-night without an explanation, Mr. Archer," she broke forth. "Is it me you love, or is it Georgina Seaford?"

The red light from the setting sun was on them, for, in talking, they had moved restlessly to the opening in the trees, and the landscape lay full around, but the warm colour did not equal the glow on his face. Hester *saw* he loved Lady Georgina: far more passionately than he had ever loved her. He stood in hesitation, like a guilty coward, and no words arose at his bidding.

"Shall I give you back your freedom?" uttered Hester; "I see we can no longer be anything to each other. I wish from my heart we had never been."

"Hester," he exclaimed, suddenly taking both her hands, "you would be well rid of me. A man with the unstable heart that mine has proved would never bring you happiness. Curse my memory, in future, as you will: I deserve it."

"But what do you promise yourself, to have become enthralled with *her*, so far above you?" was wrung from Hester, in her emotion.

"I promise myself nothing. I only know that I can live but in her presence, that she is to me in the light of an angel from heaven. May it forgive my infatuation!"

"You need forgiveness," whispered Hester. "To indulge a passion for one who will soon be the wife of another."

"Of whom?" fiercely asked the young minister. The glow on his face had faded, and his lips were so strained that the teeth were seen—he who never showed them.

"She is engaged to Lord Caudour's son."

"Ah, that's nothing, if you mean him," he answered,

drawing his breath again. "She has told me she dislikes him. And though her father desires the match, he will not force her inclinations."

"Then you wish your freedom back from me?"

And poor Hester's lips, as she asked this, were as white as his own.

"Forgive my fickleness, Hester! I *cannot* marry you, loving another."

"Then I give it you," she continued, in a sort of wild desperation. "May the wife you choose never cause you to regret me."

"Thanks, from me, would be like a mockery," he whispered; "I can only hope that you will find your reward. Let us shake hands, Hester, for the last time."

She held out her right hand. And he took it in his, and bent down his forehead upon it, and kept it there. Hester saw his lips move; she thought he was praying for her welfare. *He* pray!

They walked away in opposite directions; but soon Hester stopped, and looked after him. He was striding on. He never turned; and, as he approached the bend in the path, which would hide him from her sight, he flung the little switch away, with a sharp, determined gesture, as he had just flung away her love. Oh, the misery that overwhelmed that unhappy girl! The dreadful blank that had fallen on her! She cast herself upon the grass, where no eye could see, and sobbed aloud in her storm of despair.

She heeded not how long she lay there. When she got up, the sun had set, twilight had fallen, and she staggered as she departed. In passing the Rectory, a sudden idea occurred to her, and she went in. Scarcely in a fit state for it; but there might be no time to lose. Mr. Coomes was drinking his tea by firelight.

"Why, my dear," he said, "is it you?"

She sat down with her back to the fire, not caring that even his dim eyes should see her face in the faint light. And then she told him what she had called for—to beg him to take her brother as curate.

"My dear, it is true that Mr. Archer is going to leave me; but who told you of it?"

"He told me so himself."

"He is a changeable fellow, then. He said he did not wish it immediately known; not to any one; and requested me to keep it secret. I have been thinking of your brother."

"Oh, Mr. Coomes," she urged, "you know it was through me he was driven away from here, to give place to Mr. Archer. Since his illness that thought has rested as a weight on my conscience. He has been ill again this winter; the air there tries him. If you would only receive him as curate now?"

"We will see about it," answered Mr. Coomes. And Hester rose to go.

"Hester," he whispered, in a kindly voice, as he followed her to the door, "how is it between you and George Archer? Serene?"

"That is over," she said, striving to speak indifferently. "We have bidden each other good-bye for ever."

"If I did not think this! He is losing himself like an idiot. God's peace be with you, my child."

The Reverend George Archer went up to town with the Seafords; and Mr. Halliwell, whose year of curacy was out in Wales, took priest's orders, and became curate of Seaford. Monotonously enough for Hester the time passed until August, when the Seafords returned to the castle; but Mr. Archer was not with them, neither was Lady Georgina. It had all come out to Lord Seaford. Hester, who had heard nothing and knew nothing, was at the window when the carriages drove by; watching for them, if the truth must be told. The two carriages passed them quickly, and she

did not recognize a single face, save little Ellen's, who was sitting forward. She looked for Georgina's, and she looked for *his*, but she saw neither. Near the park gates, that same evening, she met the child and the governess. Hester entered, and sat down with the latter on one of the benches, and the little girl ran about in glee ; it was paradise to her, after the confinement of London. Hester's throat was twitching wildly ; but she would not ask after him. She did, however, inquire, in a roundabout way, of Lady Georgina, hoping that might lead to his name.

"De Lady Georgina? Oh, she is well enough!" answered Mademoiselle Berri. "You know dat she did marry yesterday."

"Marry!" echoed Hester, her heart standing still.

"It was the quietest wedding possible, because Madame la Comtesse is so ill. De Lady Georgina, she is all for de show, and she was not pleased ; but de Earl would not hear of having de world. Dey had but ten people at de breakfast besides de family."

"Are they—is Lady Georgina come back with you?" gasped Hester in her terrible suspense.

"Come back wid us! Ma foi! She did go away wid her husband after de breakfast. Dat is anoder of your barbarous English customs. Wid us, when a young girl marries, she does stay in her own house wid her mother for some days, but you send de poor young thing all away by herself.—Lady El-lène, you will have de face like one chou rouge if you do jump like dat."

Hester could bear it no longer. "Who has Lady Georgina married?" she asked in low tones, turning her face away as though watching the movements of the child.

"My dear, who should she marry but de Honourable Caudour? He was fiancé to her dis long time—I do not know your word for it. He does dote upon her, and thinks

her de vraie ange. Dey are gone to Lord Caudour's château at Riche-monde, and den dey are going on to de Continent. Ah ciel! if I was but going too! Dis England will kill me. I have de vrai mal du pays at my heart—El-lène, donc! sois plus tranquille, mon enfant."

Sunshine stole over Hester. She nerved herself to speak in a careless tone, with her face still turned to the child. "Has Mr. Archer come back with the young Seafords?"

"What, de young minister? Not he. He will never enter de doors of dat family more, and we have anoder tutor. My dear, don't you know dat de Earl turned him out?"

"No," uttered Hester.

"It was—let me see—I tink in June; I know de shivers of de dreadful English spring had passed. The Vicomte, young Sale, heard a great chatter, like a dis-pute, between his sister and de minister, and he looked into de room and heard him say dat he would forgive her for saying what she did, and she was laughing den, and he had got her hands and was kissing and clasping dem like one great donkey as he was, poor fellow, for he might have seen dat she was but amusing herself wid him. So Lord Sale—I do think he did it for mischief, for de Earl had come in den, and Mr. Archer had gone out—asked his sister when de wedding was to be, and why she did not write to Mr. Caudour to tell him she had jilted him for de parson. Wid dat de Earl rose up his ears and asked what was meant. I do not know what Lord Sale said, but Georgina she was in de furious rage wid him for days after. De Earl went into de library and sent a servant for Mr. Archer to go to him dere."

"Did he go?" cried Hester, breathlessly.

"My dear, how could he help himself? And when he got dere he showed himself de double donkey, for he did

avow to de Earl dat he *loved* de lady Georgina—dat he loved her better dan life."

"And Lord Seaford—what did he say?"

"What would he be likely to say in such a case?" returned the governess. "Dey are all full of sang froid, all de English nobles. He just poohed him down wid contempt, and said his services were not required in de house after dat hour, and paid him his money, and wished him good morning, all cool and civil. Dat's what de Earl did."

"So he left!"

"He saw de Lady Georgina before it, though. And she treated him as civilly as de Earl had done, and said she was very sorry, but it was no fault of hers, and dat he should not so have mistaken her. He said dat his heart was breaking for her—could she not see dat it was? She replied dat she should always retain a pleasant memory of his flattering sentiments towards her, but she could not say any more. Oh, my dear, she was a vain girl; she did think men were but made to make homage to her. She went all gay to a soirée at de Duchess of Gloucester's dat same evening, widout one care for de killed heart of dat poor young clergyman. Child, you are looking pale; it is dis heat; you should untie your bonnet-strings."

"I feel the heat very much," murmured Hester.

"Oh, but talk of pale faces, you should have seen his when he left de Earl's," added mademoiselle. "I was coming in from a walk wid de little girl and met him in de hall. He held out his hand to me to say good-bye, and I looked up at his wan face—it was one tableau of miserie. 'Where are you going to, dat you say farewell?' I asked, for I did not yet know what had happened dat morning. 'I know not where I am going,' he replied; 'away from here.' And while I was in de surprise he was gone."

"Where did he go?" asked Hester.

"My dear, who's to know? If you ask my opinion, I should say dat he just went to de nearest river, or to an empty room and a charcoal fire. I know if my face betrayed what his did, I should not be anxious to live. I did pity him wid all my heart. And he was so handsome, so much de scholar and de gentleman."

"Was he never heard of again at Lord Seaford's?" resumed Hester, in a low voice.

"Never. He was not likely to be. Are you going, my dear?"

"Mamma will be waiting tea for me," said Hester. "I shall see you another day."

She walked away with her bruised heart. All through that spring and summer she had unconsciously cherished a hope of the period when he should return to the castle. As she reached home Lucy met her.

"Hester," she whispered, "we have been hearing some news from Mrs. Stannard. George Archer has made such a fool of himself."

"Ah!"

"Made an offer to Lord Seaford for Georgina, or something of that sort: Mrs. Stannard never learned quite the particulars, she says. And Lord Seaford turned him out of the house that same day."

"Mademoiselle Berri said he had left," returned Hester, knowing she must answer something. "I have just seen her in the park."

"I fear you have long been grieving after him," went on Lucy, "though you persist in being so silent over it. Your coolness with each other, and the breaking off of the engagement, which you never satisfactorily explained, are accounted for now. What an idiot he must be, to have dared to think seriously of Georgina Seaford! I am sure

this news must cure you. Never give a thought to him again, Hester; he is not worth it."

"I do not think of him," answered Hester, almost fretfully. She could not bear that even Lucy should suspect her misery.

"What a good thing it is, Hester, as things have turned out, that your engagement was not made public, especially at the castle! Lady Georgina and Mr. Caudour were married yesterday."

"Mademoiselle said so. What did Mrs. Stannard call here for? To give you this news about Mr. Archer?"

"She came with a message from Lady Seaford: that Ellen would be ready for you whichever day you would like to begin with her."

"I will not go to the castle again," said Hester, quietly; "that is over."

"Hester," said her mother to her, as she kissed her forehead when they parted for the night, "you can think over resuming your duties with Ellen Seaford. My opinion, my dear child, is that it will be pleasant to yourself to do so, rather than the contrary, as it will serve to occupy your mind. But if you still say it cannot be, perhaps we can substitute Lucy."

Mrs. Halliwell said no more, only kissed her again, more affectionately than usual, but Hester understood. She lay awake all that night, battling with her unhappiness. Towards morning she began to ask herself whether it was not *her duty* to go again to the castle, rather than idly to resign herself to sorrow.

It is true she disliked to mingle with them again: to be in the scenes that reminded her so powerfully of *him*. Her mother had said that Lucy might possibly be her substitute; but Lucy's education had been of a higher order than her own, for she had shown much aptitude for all polite

accomplishments, and Hester knew that not very patiently would Lucy sit down to teach the rudiments of English to a child. The salary received from Lady Seaford was a consideration to them, for her brother, what with his illness and the pitiful stipend of his first year, had been obliged to encroach considerably on their means. Mary's education was also now expensive. They had tried the plan of Lucy teaching her, but it did not answer; both were impatient: a sister can rarely exert the necessary authority over a sister. Added to these reflections, Hester felt that the occupation would really serve to divert her mind.

So she resumed her visits to the castle. Mr. Archer's name was never mentioned there by any one. Mademoiselle Berri seemed to have exhausted her stock of information that first afternoon, and did not again revert to the subject. Hester steadily went through her duties at home and abroad, and thus got over the days as she best could: but at night she would turn about upon her sleepless bed and moan, "Oh, that he would come! that he would come back to be forgiven!"

And the days, and the weeks, and the years went on, and they never heard of him, and he never came.

BOOK THE SECOND.

CHAPTER VI.

THE INFIRMARY PUPIL.

The Reverend Mr Elliot and his wife were seated one day in their home, a rural parsonage in one of the Midland counties, discussing plans and prospects for their numerous family. Mr. Elliot was the uncle of George Archer, who was his sister's child ; but that has nothing, just now, to do with the story.

Though Mr. Elliot's living was a good one, he had much difficulty in making both ends meet, for his family was growing up, and his sons were expensive. The present discussion concerned Thomas, the eldest son. He had served an apprenticeship to the medical profession, and a plan was in agitation to place him for improvement under Mr. Dicks, an eminent surgeon attached to the infirmary at Nearford, the county town.

Perhaps what had first given rise to the idea of placing him at Nearford was the fact that Mrs. Elliot had an aunt living there, who, they hoped, would give Tom a home for the period, which would be an economy : in Mr. Tom Elliot's case, a very great economy, for he was of the fraternity denominated "fast." Let it come from where it would, from somewhere or from nowhere, Tom must spend money.

Mrs. Agatha Needham, a maiden lady, had lived in Nearford all her life, which was by no means a definite number of years, her own register stating forty-nine, and that of the church sixty-three. She possessed a very pretty property, had never shown herself backward in kindness and hospitality to her relations, and Mrs. Elliot had been encouraged to make the application as to Tom, intimating, what was really the truth, that should her aunt Agatha refuse her bold request they should be compelled to relinquish placing Tom with Mr. Dicks, for the expense would be beyond their means. Mrs. Agatha's reply had arrived, and Mr. and Mrs. Elliot were discussing it.

She was very willing to receive Thomas, she wrote, provided he would undertake to observe certain conditions: that he would never smoke, would never speak to her two maid-servants, except in her presence, and would always be in bed by half-past ten, unless he was out with herself at a whist-party. Let him promise this, and she would keep him, pay his laundress expenses, and allow him half a crown a week pocket-money until his studies were over.

Mr. Thomas Elliot was called into the presence of his parents, promised obedience to the rules, and vowed they were just what he should have laid down for himself. Whether Mr. Elliot quite believed him is doubtful, from the urgent cautions he pressed upon him not to offend Mrs. Agatha. When Tom was released he went into explosions of laughter, especially touching the weekly half-crown. He arrived at Nearford, a dashing young man of twenty-one, showy in dress, free in manner, but the pink of quiet propriety in the presence of Mrs. Agatha; he speedily became popular in Nearford, and Mrs. Agatha grew intensely proud of him.

"My dear Thomas," she exclaimed to him one morning

at breakfast, "what an extraordinary smell of tobacco-smoke pervades the house when you are in it!"

"It does, ma'am; it's highly disagreeable. Nearly makes me sick, sometimes."

"But what can it proceed from?" pursued Mrs. Agatha, sniffing very much over her muffin. "You assure me you do not smoke; you promised solemnly, you know."

"I smoke!" echoed Mr. Tom; "I touch a filthy cigar! It comes from my clothes."

"How does it get into them?" wondered Mrs. Agatha.

"They are such a set, aunt, at that infirmary—have cigars in their mouths from morning to night. Sometimes I can't see across our dissecting-room for the smoke. Of course, my clothes get impregnated with it."

"Dear me, Thomas, how sorry I am for you! But don't talk about dissecting-rooms, if you please. The smell must also get into your eyes, and hair, and whiskers!"

"So it does, uncommon strong. But I douse my head in the big basin every morning, and that takes it off."

"The governors of the infirmary ought to be reported to the Lord Lieutenant," cried Mrs. Agatha, warmly. "I never heard of anything so shameful. How can they think of permitting the patients to smoke?"

"It's not the patients, aunt," returned Mr. Tom, smothering a grin. "What should bring them in the dissecting-room: unless—ahem!—they are carried there?"

"Then is it the doctors?"

"No; it's the pupils."

"Misguided youths," ejaculated Mrs. Agatha. "And you, a clergyman's son, have to associate with them! Never you learn smoking, my dear Thomas. But about this smell: I really do not know what is to be done. The maids commence coughing whenever they enter your bedroom, for the fumes of smoke there, they tell me, are overpowering."

"Ah, I know they are. It's where all my clothes hang."

"Suppose you were to get some lumps of camphor and sew them in your pockets?" suggested Mrs. Agatha, alighting on a bright idea. "If it keeps fever from the frame, it may keep tobacco-smoke from clothes. Get six-penny-worth, Thomas."

"I'll get a shilling's worth," said Tom. "Though I fear its properties don't reach smoke."

"Oh, Thomas, I forgot. Did you hear the noise in the house last night?"

"Noise?" responded Mr. Tom.

"A noise on the stairs, like somebody bumping up them. It was just two o'clock, for I heard the clock strike. When Rachel came to dress me this morning, she said it must have been Minny racing after the mice. But I never heard her make such a noise before. I hope it did not disturb you."

"Not at all, aunt," answered Tom, burying his face in his handkerchief: "I never woke till half an hour ago. Cats do make an awful noise sometimes. I'm off to the infirmary."

"And you have eaten no breakfast! I can't think what the lad lives upon."

In the hall, as Mr. Thomas was dashing across it, he encountered the housemaid; a pretty girl with cherry cheeks.

"Look here, sir," she said. "See what we picked up this morning. If mistress had found it, instead of me and cook, whatever would you have done?"

"My latch key! I must have dropped it when I came in, in the night. But after a punch jollification, following on a tripe supper, one's perceptive faculties are apt to be obscured. That's a fact undisputed in physics, Rachel, my dear." And as Tom dropped the latch-key into his pocket,

he acknowledged his obligation to the finder in a way of his own.

"Now, Mr. Thomas," remonstrated Rachel, "I have threatened fifty times that I'd tell missis of you, and now I will. You want to get me out of my place, sir, going on in this way."

"Do!" cried Tom. "Go and tell her at once. And harkee, my dear, if you and cook get talking to the old lady about the smoke in my bedroom, I'll shoot the first of you I come near. You should put the windows and door open."

Just as the incorrigible Tom walked off, Mrs. Agatha Needham opened the breakfast-room door, and down dropped the maid upon her hands and knees, and began rubbing away at the oilcloth.

"Rachel! was that my nephew talking to you?"

"Mr. Thomas has gone out, ma'am."

"Yes. Who was he talking to before he went?"

"Talking to, ma'am? Oh, I remember; he asked about his umbrella. I think he must have left it at the infirmary, or at Mr. Dicks's."

"Asking a necessary question I will look over," said Mrs. Agatha; "but should he ever show a disposition to speak with you upon indifferent subjects, you will come straight off to me and report him, Rachel; for it is not allowed."

"Very well, ma'am."

From the above specimen of Mr. Tom Elliot, it may be wondered how he contrived to remain an inmate of Mrs. Agatha Needham's and continue in that lady's good graces. It was a marvel to Tom himself, and he was wont to say in that favourite resort, the dissecting-room, that though he had got on the ancient maiden's blind side, he had more trouble than enough to keep himself there.

One day sundry of the infirmary pupils were assembled in the above-mentioned choice retreat. The relics lying

about were not very pleasant to look upon for an uninitiated eye, but it seemed that the young gentlemen engaged in the cheering business of studying these lopped branches did not find their occupation particularly disagreeable. A looker-on might have described them as being rather "jolly." There were seven of them: four had short pipes in their mouths, and the three others cigars, and they were smoking away with all their might, Mr. Tom Elliot being amongst them, and some pewter pots of beer, which stood on the table in close contact with the—relics.

"How did old Moss come out last night?" inquired one, with a shock head of very red hair, as he sat on a deal side-table, and kicked his feet against a neighbouring wall; "Old Moss" being a botanist, who was then giving lectures in the city, which the infirmary pupils were expected to attend.

"What's the good of asking me?" responded Tom Elliot. "Pass the pot, Jones."

"I'd a better engagement, and didn't show," resumed the first speaker. "Were you not there either, Elliot?"

"I just was there. And got jammed close to two of the loveliest girls I ever saw in my life. One of 'em is a prize. You are beginning that arm wrong, Davis."

"Teach your grandmother," returned Mr. Davis. "I was practising on arms when you were in leading-strings."

"Elliot needn't talk. He'll never be any good; hasn't the knack of holding the knife."

"It's because I don't practise. I asked old What's-his-name, the sexton of St. Luke's, how much he'd charge for a subject."

"How much did he say, Elliot? That fellow does more business than all the sextons of Nearford put together."

"Because he is favoured by accidental circumstances," interrupted Davis, who was somewhat older than the rest of

the pupils, and (though it is not of the slightest consequence to mention it, as it has nothing to do with the story) was a son of Mr. Davis of Seaford. "St. Luke's is a populous parish. I have seen on a Sunday as many as six funerals there; and the churchyard is snug and quiet, free from overlookers on a moonlight night. What did he ask you, Elliot? He'd clap it on to you, being a fresh one."

"No; I told him I was here. A young one, from one guinea to three; a full-grown, from seven to ten."

"Did you strike a bargain? Who's that at my sandwiches? Hand 'em over here."

"No, I didn't," said Elliot. "The fact is, I don't know how on earth to get it smuggled in, or where to hide it when it is in. If the old lady, or those two female slaveys came upon it in my bedroom some odd day—whew! they'd screech out blue murder. I should lose my quarters, too."

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Elliot, if you like," cried a very young student, eagerly—Mr. Dobbs. "I'll go halves with you for a three-guinea one, and we can put it at my place, and you can come there and exercise. My landlady won't care, if I give her a pint of gin at the bringing in."

"I'll see about it," answered Elliot. "Give us the pewter again."

"How Elliot dips into the beer to-day! One has no chance, drinking with him."

"Send for some more," was that gentleman's rejoinder. "This is dry work."

"Much work you are doing!"

"Well, you are at it, Jones, so don't growl. I am more agreeably occupied; recalling those lovely visions of last night."

"I say," cried Davis, "who were those girls Elliot's raving about?"

"Who's to know? There were fifty girls in the room. Very likely they were the Thomsons."

"Annihilate the Thomsons!" interrupted Elliot. "The one's cross-eyed and the other's sickly. D'ye think I don't know the Thomson girls? These were strangers. At least I have never seen their faces at lectures before."

"Where did your two beauties sit?"

"About half-way up the room, on the left-hand side," responded Tom. "Close underneath the astronomical map."

"I know," shouted Dobbs. "They had a big, fat duenna between them, hadn't they?"

"Just so, little Dobbs. In a scarlet hat."

"A scarlet hat!" echoed Davis.

"Or a turban," added Elliot: "might be meant for one or the other. A glaring red cone, three feet high."

"Over a flaxen wig, which she puts in papers, and makes believe it's her own hair," rejoined little Dobbs. "It's their aunt."

"You insignificant monkey—*their* aunt!" broke forth Elliot. "If you don't tell the name without delay, I'll dissect you. You see I'm expiring under the suspense."

"I don't think much of the girls, myself," persisted the young gentleman, delighted to exercise Elliot's patience. "The dark-eyed one is the best, and that's Clara."

"Out of the way, Jones—let me get at him. I'll Clara him, as he——"

"Hallo, Elliot, don't take the arm with you!" interrupted Davis. "Dobbs, you young limb, if you cause this confusion again I'll turn you out. Keep still, Elliot, and I'll tell you. They were his cousins, the Blake girls, Clara and Georgy."

"That they were not," said Mr. Dobbs. "They were the two Freers."

"Oh, the Freers!" echoed Davis; "they don't often show. Old Bagwig keeps them up tight. They are the prettiest girls in Nearford."

"Who's old Bagwig?" demanded Elliot.

"The Papa Freer. As cute a lawyer as any on the bench. He sports a wig with a bag behind; the only relic of bygone days to be seen in the town."

"I intend to monopolize one of those girls for myself," announced Elliot.

"Phew! wish you joy of your chance. Bagwig's laying by sacks of gold, and designs those two female inheritors of it to marry on the top of the ladder. Nothing under a foreign prince. You'd never get admitted inside their house, if you tried for a year."

"I tell you that girl's a prize, and shall be mine: and I'll bet you two crowns to one that I'm inside their house within a week. Tell me I can't get in where I choose! You can't, perhaps," added the audacious Elliot, drawing up his handsome figure in his vanity.

"Done!" cried Jones.

"And I'll take him too," echoed Davis. "Which of the two is the prize?"

"There's one with piercing dark eyes, giving out wicked glances," answered Elliot. "And splendid dark hair."

"Yes, that's Clara."

"And a Roman sort of nose, and rosy pink colour."

"That *is* Clara."

"Tall, fine shape, lovely fall in her shoulders," went on Elliot.

"Yes, yes; no mistaking Clara."

"Well then, it's not she."

"Now, Elliot, don't try on any gammon. It must be the young one then, and that's Loo."

"Loo, is it?" returned Tom Elliot. "The giantess in the scarlet top-knot, was that the Mamma Freer?"

"She's dead. Who was it, Dobbs?"

"Old Mother Stevens, the greatest guy in all the world. One day——"

"Hark! hush! Listen, will you!" interupted Davis. "There's Dicks's voice, as I'm alive."

The metamorphosis was like magic. Certain overcoats of the pupils, which lay in a heap in a corner of the room, were raised, and the pewter pots hidden under them; slops of beer, rather prevalent, were rubbed dry with handkerchiefs; cigars and pipes, all alight as they were, were thrust into side-pockets; tables, as sitting-places, were abandoned, and when Mr. Dicks, M.R.C.S., entered, every student presented the appearance of sober industry, some busy with the operating knives, some buried deep in surgical books of reference.

If fortune ever favoured any venturesome layer of bets, Tom Elliot was certainly the one that day. On his return home in the afternoon, he found Mrs. Agatha Needham cutting most extraordinary capers. She was evidently in a desperate state of excitement and anger. Tom's conscience took alarm. He believed something had come out about himself, and felt as if a cold bath had been dashed over him.

"Dear aunt, whatever is the matter?" he ventured to ask, finding she did not speak, and thinking silence might look like self-confession. "You are surely not taken with St. Vitus's dance in the legs?"

"Never was such a thing heard of! never was such a wicked act perpetrated! Rachel—my bonnet and velvet mantle. Thomas, nephew, don't stand peering at my legs. It's not in them, it's in my mind."

Mr. Thomas sat down, completely cowed. What on earth

had come to light? The latchkey, or kissing Rachel, or smoking in his bedroom at night? or had that sexton——

"By all that's awful, that must be it," reasoned Tom. "The bungling fool has mistaken me and sent the thing home; and she and the girls have turned Bluebeard's wife and opened the box." Tom's face began to stream down. Whatever could he do?

"Has a—a case—been brought here, ma'am: a heavy one?" he stammered. "I came home on purpose, because there has been a mistake. It belongs to Mr. Davis, senior student, and ought to have gone to his lodgings. I'll get a man, and have it moved directly."

"Mercy, boy!" cried Mrs. Agatha. "I don't know anything about cases. If they had brought a dozen here I should never have seen them to-day. There has been a wicked man here, Thomas; that's what there has been. A lawyer, I believe he calls himself, and—— That's right, Rachel; I'll go and consult mine now."

Tom's spirits went up amazingly. "Then *I* have not offended you, dear aunt? I feared—I don't know what I didn't fear—that somebody might have been trying to traduce my character to you."

"Child and woman have I lived in this house for sixt—over forty years," went on Mrs. Agatha, unheeding Mr. Tom's fears; "my own leasehold property, and my father and mother's before me. And now an impious wretch comes forward and says there's a flaw in the lease, and I must turn out, and am responsible for back rent! I'll go and consult the first lawyer in the town. Come along with me, Thomas."

"It's impossible, dear aunt. I have six hours' work before me to-day: reading up for Mr. Dicks." The truth was, he had made an appointment for billiards.

"That's exceedingly vexatious. I should like to have

had you with me for a witness. But you are quite right, Thomas; never put your studies aside for anything. I'll wish you good afternoon.—Rachel, if any one comes, you don't know when I shall be at home, for I am gone to Lawyer Freer's."

"Lawyer Freer's!" screamed Tom, rushing after his aunt and nearly upsetting Rachel. "Of course you must have a witness, aunt, if you are going there. My reading can wait. Just stop while I slip on another coat and waistcoat."

"What is the matter with those you have on?" demanded Mrs. Agatha.

"Oh—this is my professional suit. And, when I walk with you, I like to look as your nephew ought."

"Dutiful lad!" aspirated Mrs. Agatha. "He shall not be a loser by his attachment to me."

Lawyer Freer was at home, and ensconced Mrs. Agatha in his consulting-room. Her dutiful nephew slipped aside as they were going in, and shut the door on the old lady and the attorney. Mrs. Agatha Needham was too full of her subject to notice, at first, the absence of her nephew; and afterwards she would not disturb the consideration of her case by calling for him. They both concluded Mr. Tom was exercising his patience in company with the clerks in the front office.

Not he. He was as daring as he was high; and he went along the passage, peeping here and peeping there, until he came to a room where two young ladies were seated—his beauties of the previous night. Clara, the eldest, a splendid girl; Louisa (the prize) prettier still, with dancing eyes and shining curls.

"I beg pardon," cried Tom, as the young ladies rose in surprise, "do not let me disturb you. I am sent here to wait while my aunt holds a private consultation with Mr. Freer—Mrs. Agatha Needham."

The young ladies bowed. They had a speaking acquaintance with Mrs. Agatha, and hoped she was well. Tom assured them she was very well, and went on talking upon other subjects, and made himself entirely at home.

Mr. Tom Elliot had won his bet.

CHAPTER VII.

THE GREAT CAUSE, "NEWCOME *versus* NEEDHAM."

MRS. AGATHA NEEDHAM found her lease and its flaw could not be settled by the lawyers. The cause, in due time, was entered for trial at the March Assizes, "Newcome *versus* Needham." It caused a great sensation in Nearford: all the holders of leasehold property arguing that if Mrs. Agatha was disturbed in her long and peaceful occupancy, where was their security? As to Mrs. Agatha, it may be questioned if she enjoyed a full night's rest during the period of suspense. Nothing could exceed the sympathy and interest shown by Tom Elliot in the affair: as Mrs. Agatha observed, what she should have done without him she did not know. His legs were kept on the run between his aunt's house and Lawyer Freer's; and the numerous messages forwarded by the old lady nearly drove the lawyer wild. *She* was fidgety, and Thomas pressed her on.

"Do you want my services with Mr. Freer this morning, aunt?"

"No, Thomas, I think not this morning."

"You'd do well to send to him, if only the slightest message. No trouble to me. Those lawyers require perpetual looking up. They are so apt to forget the interests of one client in those of another. It's out of sight out of mind with them."

"Very true, Thomas. Thank you. Go down, then, to

Mr. Freer: my compliments, and I have sent to know if there's anything fresh. But I am ashamed to give you this frequent trouble."

"Trouble's a pleasure, aunt, when you are concerned," replied Thomas.

"The comfort of possessing such a nephew!" ejaculated Mrs. Agatha.

Tom flew off, but the stars were against him that day. Lawyer Freer was out; so much the better: for Tom could more safely find his way to the young ladies, as he had now done many and many a time. They had also taken to look for him, and they saw him coming down the street.

"Here's Mr. Elliot, Loo," observed Clara; and a blush of satisfaction rose to her face, and she turned from the window to a mirror and smoothed her hair here and there with her hand. Louisa did not answer, but a much brighter blush rose to *her* face, and she bent lower over the drawing she was preparing for her master. For Louisa, scarcely eighteen, still had masters attending her, and Clara, who was two years older, looked upon her as a child. Child as she might be, though, she had grown to *love* Tom Elliot.

Why did they both blush, some one may ask; surely they were not both in love with him? Not exactly. Tom Elliot was a general admirer, and whilst he had become really attached to Louisa Freer, and had striven privately to gain her affections, he had shown a very fair share of admiration for Clara, partly in homage to her beauty, partly to divert suspicion from her sister. And Clara Freer, who had no objection in the world to receiving admiration from so handsome and popular a man as Tom Elliot, certainly did not repel him.

"He is over head and ears in love," Clara was proceeding to add; but her sister interrupted her in a startling voice.

"In love! With whom?"

"With me," complacently replied Miss Freer; "who else is there? His next move will be to make me an offer —in his random way."

Louisa's heart beat fast against her side, and her blood tingled to her fingers' ends. "Make *you* an offer!" she gasped forth. "Would you marry him?"

"Bless the child! I marry a medical student, an embryo surgeon! I look a little higher than that, Loo. But if Tom Elliot were as rich in wealth as he is in attractions— why, then you might stand a speedy chance of being a bridesmaid. I know he adores me."

No more was said, for Tom entered and began rattling away, after his own fashion. An attractive companion he undoubtedly was. Presently Miss Freer was called from the room by a servant, upon some domestic affair.

"My dearest Loo," he whispered, as soon as they were alone, "you look sad this morning. What is it?"

"Oh, nothing," she answered, bursting into tears. And Tom, all surprise and concern, clasped her in his arms, and was in the very agreeable act of kissing away her tears, when Clara returned. It was sooner than they had expected her, and they were fairly caught.

Clara, her features naturally of a haughty cast, could put on a *look* when she liked. Mr. Elliot had never yet been favoured with it; but it shone out in full force as she demanded an explanation from both of them.

"The truth is, Miss Freer," said Tom, speaking up like a man, "that I love your sister. Until I saw her, all young ladies were alike to me—that is, I was fond of them all. But now she is the only one I care for, or ever shall care for in the world. I did not intend this to come out yet, and I hope you will keep our secret."

"And pray," returned Clara, boiling over with rage

and mortification, "when *did* you intend it to come out, sir?"

"When? Not till I was well established in my profession, and could ask for her as I ought to do, of Mr. Freer."

"Clara," uttered the younger sister, her tears falling fast in agitation, for she had read the expression in the elder's eye, "for pity's sake do not betray me to papa. Dear Clara!"

"I shall acquaint your father instantly, as is my duty," was the cold reply. "We shall have a baby in leading-strings entangling itself in a matrimonial engagement next."

"Clara, my dear sister—let me call you so for the first, though I hope not for the last time—be reasonable, be kind," said Mr. Elliot, trying *his* powers of persuasion. But, effectual as they had hitherto proved with the young lady, they failed now.

"What I can do to oppose your views concerning my sister, I will do," she vehemently answered. "You have played a traitor's part, Mr. Elliot, in seeking her affections. I beg you to leave the house at once, and you will never be admitted to it again."

"But, Clara," he remonstrated, "you——"

"I have told you to leave the house," she reiterated, pale with anger. "If you do not quit it this instant, I shall ring for the servants to show you out."

"Very well, Miss Freer," he said, all his customary equanimity returning to him. "Louisa, my darling," he impressively added, turning to her for a last farewell, "we may be obliged to bend to circumstances and temporarily separate; but remember—come what may, I will be true to you. Be you so to me. Will you promise?"

"I will," she whispered; and Mr. Tom Elliot bent down

and sealed it on her lips, regardless of Miss Clara's energetic appeal to the bell.

Clara Freer made her own tale good to her father, and Thomas made his good to Mrs. Agatha. For, in the violent indignation of the attorney, he had informed that lady of her nephew's having presumed to make love to his daughter, and Mrs. Agatha, overwhelmed with the first shock of the news, wrote off an imperative summons to Tom's father, telling him to post to Nearford upon a matter of life and death, which summons brought the alarmed parent flying at express speed.

Every one who heard of the affair pronounced them a couple of simpletons. A medical pupil, of twenty-one, without any definite hopes or money whatever, to have talked of marriage, was ridiculous; and for a young lady, *with* money and prospects, to have listened to him, was more ridiculous still. The clergyman, when he arrived and found what the matter was, wished to treat it as a joke; the lawyer was too outraged to treat it in any way but in earnest; while Tom strove to deny it to Mrs. Agatha.

"There's nothing in it, dear aunt," he pleaded. "Don't you believe any of them."

"But Miss Freer affirms that she caught you kissing her sister," persisted Mrs Agatha. "How do you account for that?"

"I'm sure I don't know how it is to be accounted for," answered Tom, demurely. "I believe I must have dropped asleep with my eyes open, and done it in a dream. I was sitting there, waiting for the lawyer to come in, and had got tired to death."

Mrs. Agatha was staggered. She had not much faith in that sort of dream, but she had great faith in Tom's word.

"Kissing is very bad, Thomas," she observed doubtingly.

"It's shocking," promptly answered Thomas. "You

cannot believe, ma'am, I should be guilty of it—awake. Never tried to kiss any young lady in my life, except my sisters ; never wanted to."

Not, however, to his father and Mr. Freer did Thomas Elliot make a similar defence. To them he told the truth boldly—that he was in love with the young lady, and meant to marry her if she would wait for him.

His impudence struck Lawyer Freer speechless. "Sir," he stuttered to the parson, when speech came to him, "I insist upon it that you find means to stop this presumption of your son's. You are a clergyman, sir, and must feel that it is a disgrace to him, to my family, and to the age we live in."

"I'll talk to him," responded Mr. Elliot, meekly. "I am sure he will hear reason."

So he took his graceless son alone into the bedroom of the hotel where he had put up, and did "talk" to him. But Tom remained as hard as a flint, protesting that no father had a right to control his son in the choice of a wife.

"You will find he has," angrily repeated Mr. Elliot, provoked to warmth. "I forbid you—do you hear me ?—I *forbid* you to think any more of this."

"I shall be sure to marry her in the end— if it's twenty years to come," persisted Tom. "I have told her so."

"At your peril," uttered Mr. Elliot ; "at the peril of disobedience. And deliberate disobedience to a father never goes unpunished, remember."

"I'll risk the punishment if ever I get the luck," dutifully concluded Mr. Tom to himself.

The Reverend Mr. Elliot returned home, and matters went on quietly for a week or two, Tom finding no opportunity of seeing Louisa, excepting on Sundays, when he went to St. Luke's, which was Mr. Freer's parish church,

and enshrined himself in a pew within view of the lawyer's, always telling Mrs. Agatha, who expected him to go to church with her, that there was an unusual press of indoor patients at the infirmary.

Meanwhile the affair was talked of abroad, and a country squire, who was intimate with the attorney's family and very much admired Louisa, came forward when he heard of it and made her an offer, fearing he might lose her. All the blame, be it observed, was laid by every one upon Tom Elliot; Louisa got none of it. The proposal was complacently received by Lawyer Freer, for it was a first-rate match for his daughter. He, like others, had not cast much reproach upon Louisa, his indignation being concentrated on the audacious infirmary pupil; and now that the intimacy between the two was broken off, the lawyer concluded the affair was at an end, and so dismissed it from his mind.

"If I could have chosen from the whole county for you, Louisa, I should have fixed on Turnbull," observed the lawyer to his daughter. "What do you say, Clara?"

Clara said nothing: she was sulky and cross. She considered herself much handsomer than that chit Louisa, yet all the offers were going to her.

"His rent-roll is four thousand a-year, all clear and unencumbered," continued Mr. Freer. "I had the settlement of affairs, last year, at his father's death. You are a lucky child."

"I should not like to live in the country," timidly remarked Louisa, not daring to make any more formidable objection.

"Not like—what! raise an objection to Turnbull Park? There's not a prettier spot for its size in the county!" cried the attorney. "I wish *I* had the chance of living there."

"If Mr. Thomas Elliot were its owner, we might hear

less of objection to 'living in the country,'" very spitefully exclaimed Miss Freer.

"Thomas Elliot!" repeated the lawyer; "hang Thomas Elliot!" He looked inquiringly from one to the other: Clara's face was pale and severe; Louisa's burning. "Hark ye, young ladies," he said, "we will dispense with naming that person in future. Had Louisa not given him up, I would have discarded her in disgrace. I would, on my solemn word. Squire Turnbull dines here to-morrow, Clara. Let the dinner be first-rate."

Once more were the pupils assembled in a private department of the infirmary. Not the dissecting-room this time, but the mortuary; and they were looking at—well, no matter what: something which had been in one of the wards the previous evening. Their pots of beer were absent, but their careless jokes were not.

"Elliot's late this morning," observed Jones. "Won't we have a shy at him when he comes!"

"I wonder if he knows it?"

"Not yet," answered little Dobbs. "I'll bet a shilling to a crown he doesn't. It was only through my aunt Blake drinking tea last night with Guy Stevens and her turban that it came out."

"Which is gone?" interrupted Elliot, coming in with a cigar between his lips, and bustling forward to look at what was before them. "Oh, it's that one! Well, we shall know now what was really the matter with him. Poor fellow! he was a fine chap."

"I say, there's a chance of getting him."

"Is there?" returned Elliot. "What about the mother and cousins?"

"It is believed he has none. None have turned up, as yet."

"Which will be prime," added little Dobbs. "Heard the news, Elliot?"

"I have heard no news."

"About a friend of yours," Davis interposed; "going to be married."

Mr. Elliot puffed on apathetically, and made no reply.

"I say, Elliot," began Jones again, "do you know Turnbull?"

"I don't know any Turnbull," responded Tom, who, as little Dobbs phrased it, seemed "cranky" that morning.

"Turnbull of Turnbull Park. Drives iron-grey horses in his drag."

"Oh, that lot! A short, stout cove; looks a candidate for apoplexy. Splendid cattle they are."

"He's going into the matrimonial noose, Elliot."

"He may go into another noose if he likes. Who called him a friend of mine?"

"No, the lady's your friend. A clipper she is, too."

"Only Elliot does not think so. Oh no, not at all!" cried Mr. Dobbs.

"Come, Elliot," Davis said, "guess who Turnbull's going to marry."

"You, perhaps," was the sulky answer.

"I'll bet you he *has* heard it," grinned Davis; "he's so savage. It's your prize, little Loo Freer."

"What?" shrieked Elliot.

"Squire Turnbull marries Louisa Freer. Settlements are being drawn up, and wedding-dresses made."

"A lie!" shouted Elliot.

"It's not," interrupted Jones; "it's true. Dobbs' family have had the official announcement, and——"

They were interrupted by a low, peculiar whistle from Davis. It was understood. The surgeons were coming downstairs, and the pupils lapsed into silence and good behaviour.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE REVEREND SIMON WHISTLER.

Now it is not possible to defend Tom Elliot or Louisa Freer. Cast all the reproach you please at them, reader, for they well deserved it. They took alarm at the advances of Squire Turnbull, and planned a runaway marriage: though how they contrived to meet and consult was a matter of wonder afterwards to Nearford. It probably appeared to both as the only certain way of extricating Louisa; but a more lamentably imprudent step was never taken.

Prudence, however, was no concern of Tom Elliot's; all he cared for was to get it accomplished, and he went to work in a daring and unusual way. He determined to marry her in her own parish church, and he ran up to London by the night mail, procured a license, and brought a confidential friend down with him, who entered with gusto into the secret and enjoyed the fun.

The incumbent of St. Luke's, the Reverend Simon Whistler, a bachelor, and still a young man, was not altogether fitted for a parson. Such as he were not uncommon, though, in those days. He was given to following the hounds more than to following his parishioners, was fond of gentlemen's after-dinner society, but painfully awkward and nervous in the presence of ladies. Good-natured, unsuspicious, he was the very man to be imposed upon by Tom Elliot.

Nearford Assizes came on. And late on the evening of

the first day, Monday, a confidential note from Lawyer Freer was delivered to the Reverend Simon Whistler, calling upon him to perform the marriage ceremony between his youngest daughter and Mr. Thomas Elliot the following morning at ten. Mr. Freer added a request that the matter might be kept strictly private, for reasons of which he would himself inform him when they met the following day. Now if the Reverend Simon had an objection to perform one part of his clerical duty, it was that of tying the nuptial knot. Baptisms he did not mind, burials he was quite at home in, but a gay wedding was his aversion, for the ladies and their fine clothes scared all his nerves and set them shaking. So he groaned aloud when he read the lawyer's letter, but was forced to resign himself to what there was no help for.

On Tuesday morning, at twenty-five minutes past nine precisely, Lawyer Freer bustled into the town-hall, in the wake of two counsellors specially retained for Mrs. Agatha Needham. That lady herself, escorted by her nephew, and accompanied by several maiden friends, also arrived, just as the learned Baron who presided at Nisi Prius took his seat. With difficulty places were found for Mrs. Needham's party, for the Court was crammed, all the town being anxious to hear the great cause tried.

"And now, aunt, as you are comfortably fixed, I'll be off to the infirmary for an hour. It's my day to go round the wards with the surgeons."

"Why, Thomas," uttered the startled Mrs. Agatha, "you'll never think of leaving us here unprotected! Mr. Dicks will excuse you on so important an occasion as this. Those gentlemen in wigs are staring this way very unpleasantly already. How extremely ugly they are!"

"Staring, are they?" cried Tom. "I'll go and stop that. Just one moment, aunt; you'll take no harm. Back in a brace of shakes."

At ten o'clock the Reverend Mr. Whistler was in St. Luke's vestry, putting on his surplice. He had not to wait long for the wedding-party. It consisted only of Mr. Elliot, Louisa Freer (in her everyday things and a thick black veil), and a strange gentleman as groomsman.

"This is sadly unfortunate, Mr. Whistler," began Tom, in his off-hand manner, "my aunt's cause is on, and everybody's at it. Mrs. Agatha is in Court, Miss Freer and other witnesses. Mr. Freer never would have fixed the wedding for to-day had he thought the cause would come on before to-morrow. Of course he is obliged to be there, and excessively annoyed he is. He charged me with his compliments to you, and trusted his absence would make no essential difference."

A fair speech, and the parson bowed, inwardly blessing the great cause, "Newcome *v.* Needham." He had anticipated a string of ladies as long as the aisle, and a proportionate show of fans and feathers. He never performed the marriage service so glibly in his life—and he thought he had never seen a bride tremble more violently.

The fees were paid, the register signed, and the parties left the church. At the entrance, which was situated, like the church, in a low, obscure neighbourhood, stood a post-chaise and four. Mr. Tom Elliot, clearing a way through the collection of young nurses and infants there assembled, placed his bride in it, followed her in, banged-to the door, and off dashed the postboys at a gallop.

"Never accomplished a feat more cleverly in my life," chuckled Tom. "Loo, my darling, all the fathers in Christendom shan't separate us now."

The groomsman, meanwhile, after watching the chaise fairly away, returned to the vestry, and addressed the clergyman.

"Mr. Freer's compliments, sir, and he begs you will be at his house at seven to-night to celebrate the wedding."

Mr. Whistler replied in the affirmative, though not without hesitation. He had a horror of evening parties, and concluded this was nothing less than a dance. But he did not like to refuse on such an occasion, lest he should give offence; and Lawyer Freer's Easter offering was always a plumper.

It was seven that evening when Mr. Freer returned home, having snatched a hasty dinner off a pocket sandwich in the town-hall. Clara had tea ready on the table with an excellent ham and other substantial delicacies, for she knew what her father's dinners were on Assize days.

"Well, papa," she said, "is it over? How's the verdict?"

"For Miss Needham, of course," replied Lawyer Freer, throwing aside his wig and bag, for when fatigued he was addicted to sitting, in private life, in his bald head. "I knew we should have it. There was a famous clapping of hands in Court when it was delivered. Just get me my slippers, Clara. Where's your sister?"

"She went out after breakfast, telling Nancy she was going to Court with Mrs. Stevens, and might not be home till late."

"Told Nancy she was going to Court!" uttered the amazed lawyer, pausing in the act of pulling off his boots. "*My* daughter to appear in a public Assize Court! If Squire Turnbull should hear—— Good heavens, Louisa must be out of her mind! And where were my eyes that I did not see her? Ring the bell, Clara.'

"I thought it very extraordinary, papa," rejoined Clara, not sorry to get her sister into a scrape.

"Nancy," cried the lawyer, in a fume, when the housemaid appeared, "go instantly to Mrs. Stevens, ask to speak

to Miss Louisa, and tell her it is my desire that she return home with you immediately. Stay—call at Ford's, and take a fly; go in it and return in it. A pretty night Assize night is for women to be in the streets!" muttered the discomfited lawyer.

No sooner had Nancy departed than there came a rat-tat-tat to the street door, and in walked the Reverend Mr. Whistler, ushered in by the cook, who, to her own mortification, happened that day, of all days in the year, not to have "cleaned" herself. The lawyer stared, and Clara stared, for the parson had arrayed himself in evening attire, white kid gloves, silk stockings, pumps and tights. Tights in every sense of the word. They had long lain by, unused, and the parson, upon getting them out, found he had grown stouter. He went all over as red as his hunting-coat, and sat down dreadfully embarrassed, feeling convinced he had mistaken the night, and ready to swear—if he had not been a parson—at his own stupidity. Clara asked if he would take a cup of tea, and he stammered that he would, though he hated tea like poison.

"You must allow me to congratulate you, sir," he began, believing he was expected to say something about the wedding, and clearing his throat to help him to overcome his diffidence. "I was sorry not to have had that pleasure this morning."

Lawyer Freer knew of no cause for congratulation, saving the verdict in favour of Mrs. Agatha Needham. "Thank you," he said; "it is not a pleasant thing to lose a cause."

The parson expected his host to say "daughter," and if the word sounded to his ear like "cause," he attributed it to his own bewilderment.

"Indeed it is not," answered the parson, "I remember when my sister was married, my mother and the bridesmaids cried all day."

The attorney looked up with undisguised astonishment, and Miss Freer certainly was laughing. He felt sure it was at those wretched tights, and pushed his legs back under his chair as far as he could without overbalancing himself.

"Were you amused in Court to-day?" was his next question, addressing Miss Freer.

"In Court! I?" cried Clara.

"It was her sister who went," broke in the lawyer, "my youngest daughter. Clara would not have acted so indiscreetly. Louisa's not come home yet."

"Your youngest daughter went to the hall to-day!" echoed the clergyman, staring in his turn. "That is rather —rather uncommon—is it not?"

"Uncommon? It's unpardonable."

"And Mr. Elliot—was he there, too?"

"Mr. Elliot!" roared the attorney, firing at the name. "I don't know anything about Mr. Elliot. What's Mr. Elliot to me?"

"A—a—a—no quarrel, or misunderstanding, I hope, since the morning?" cried the parson, hopelessly mystified.

"Not that I am aware of, sir," coldly answered the offended attorney.

"I supposed they were leaving the town to-day," returned Mr. Whistler. "Indeed, I believed they had left it."

Mr. Freer considered, and came to the conclusion that "they" must have reference to the learned judges. "What, leave before the Assizes are over!" he echoed. "That would be a new move."

"Oh, I comprehend; they are going to remain for the Assizes?"

"Why, what should take them away before?" demanded the attorney, pushing back his chair a few inches, and beginning to think his guest a candidate for Bedlam. "Would you have the business finished by a serjeant?"

The parson coughed, wondering whether the sedate lawyer was joking, or what on earth he meant, and altogether completely at sea. At that same moment, the cook entered: "Mrs. Agatha Needham's compliments; she was exceedingly sorry to trouble Mr. Freer, but had he seen anything of her nephew? Nobody had heard of him since the morning. Mr. Dicks had sent after him a dozen times, and Mrs. Agatha feared he was being led astray by some of those people in wigs who were crowding the town."

"I know nothing of him," growled the lawyer; "*nothing.* My respects to Mrs. Needham herself."

Before the cook could turn away with the message, a fly was heard to stop at the door, and in came Nancy. "Mrs. Stevens's kind regards to Mr. and Miss Freer: she had been at home all day, but Miss Louisa had not called." The lawyer was seriously disturbed now.

"You may rely upon it, sir," interposed the clergyman, "that there is some mistake, and they are gone."

"Gone? who gone? gone where?" said Mr. Freer, in agitation. "Nancy, run in to Mrs. Blake's, and see if she is there."

"But, sir," persisted the vicar, "you may be sure they have left the town. I cannot say that I saw the carriage drive off with them, but I certainly heard it."

"Good angels help him!" ejaculated Mr. Freer; "he'll want a strait-waistcoat before the night is out. "What the dickens have the judges to do with Louisa?"

"The judges!" echoed the parson aghast. "I beg pardon—I was not speaking or thinking of the judges. I mean that your daughter has left with Mr. Tom Elliot. There's no doubt of it."

"Were your mind in a sane state, sir, you should be made to account for your vile insinuation," cried the man of law, in his sharpest tones. "How dare you couple my

daughter's name with a parcel of shameless reprobates? Tom Elliot indeed!"

"Well, this beats bull-baiting," uttered the amazed parson. "I think if anybody's mad, it's yourself, sir. I have not insinuated a breath against your daughter, or thought of her in connection with reprobates. But what more natural than that she should leave the town with her husband?"

"And pray, sir," said Mr. Freer, with forced calmness, thinking it might be better to humour his vicar until he had procured assistance, "as you say my daughter has a husband, perhaps you will inform me when she was married, and who married her?"

"Why, *I* married her, sir; married her this morning to Mr. Tom Elliot. Married them at your own request, sir."

Lawyer Freer, who had risen, sank back in his chair and broke out into a white heat.

"What do you suppose, sir, brought me here to-night but your own invitation to celebrate the wedding? Brought me in these kickshaw things," added the unhappy parson, pushing out his feet and exhibiting the tights and pumps.

"Oh, papa!" screamed Clara, "I see it all! Tom Elliot and Louisa are married."

"Married, Miss Freer; what should hinder them? Here's your father's note—'Mr. Freer presents his compliments,' and so on—requesting me to perform the ceremony at ten this morning, which I did," said Mr. Whistler, thrusting his hands into his pockets for the note. Alas! he was in momentary oblivion of having sported the uncomfortable tights; the note was in the pantaloons he had left at home.

Clara Freer went off into strong hysterics, and the lawyer into an explosion of stronger expletives. The clergyman

came in for his share of the latter, Mr. Freer insisting that he ought to have ascertained whether the note really came from him before marrying a child like Louisa to a graceless medical student.

"How could I suspect anything wrong?" asked the parson. "The handwriting was like a lawyer's, and, of course, I thought it was yours. I heard, some time ago, that Mr. Tom Elliot was paying his addresses to one of your daughters, so that when the note came it seemed but a natural sequence."

"And did you hear, pray, that Mr. Tom Elliot had been turned out of my house for it?" demanded the lawyer.

"I don't think I did; that sort of thing is not in my way much. But if I had, I should only have concluded that the quarrel was made up again, when this request of yours came."

"Request of mine, sir! How dare you call it so? Don't I tell you it was a wicked forgery? and nobody but a fool would have been taken in by it. It will be the ruin of Louisa."

"I am very sorry," deprecated the Reverend Simon. "I would join in undoing the wedding if I could. Is it any use following them? I'll go in pursuit for one, if you like, sir. My hunter's as fresh as a daisy to-night."

"Pursuit!" reiterated the irritated Lawyer Freer. "Eight o'clock at night, and ten hours' start! What use do you think pursuit would be now? And I would advise you, sir, as a lawyer, not to countenance these clandestine matches in future, or your bishop may stop your power to perform them in a way you won't like."

"I wish he would," answered the browbeaten parson. "I wish he'd unlicense St. Luke's for marriages. I'd rather do fifty funerals all in a day than one wedding. I would, indeed."

So Mr. Tom Elliot got clear off with his prize.

BOOK THE THIRD.

CHAPTER IX.

CHELSON.

THE shadow of changes was coming over Seaford. Mr. Coomes fell ill, and died; and Mr. Halliwell was only performing the duty in the interregnum that occurred until the appointing of another incumbent. Alfred had been much liked during the time that he had filled the office of curate at Seaford, and the parishioners were hoping that whoever was appointed to the living would keep him on. Failing anything better, he would have been glad of it himself, but an influential man, a friend of the late Major Halliwell's, had promised to interest himself in a certain quarter, and try and obtain for him an incumbency.

Hester was outgrowing her sorrow; but it was a work of time. Her dreams, and perhaps her waking thoughts, would sometimes present confused images of a muddy river into which a desperate man had leaped and sunk. The random words of the Swiss governess induced this. The Seafords, after the second winter there, left the castle and went abroad, and no tidings whatever had been heard of George Archer.

In spite of Hester's silence, and absence of all allusion to the subject, Mrs. Halliwell saw that a change of scene would be beneficial to her, and sent her to spend this

summer at Middlebury with Mr. and Mrs. Halliwell: many a pleasant month had Hester spent there in her youth. She did not return until September, and the first news that greeted her was that Alfred was appointed to a living in Chelson, and had just departed for it. It was a poor appointment. The living was set down as worth £170 per annum, but the net income scarcely realized £140. Alfred sent them word that Chelson was a pretty place, and its inhabitants showed him much kindness and hospitality.

Again winter went on, and spring advanced monotonously enough. An Indian letter now and then from Mrs. Pepper, and a flying visit from Aunt Copp, were the only variations in their life. Mrs. Halliwell, Hester and Lucy were alone, Mary being then at a finishing school. The new vicar, Mr. Williams, was a young man, and they became very intimate with his wife.

One day in the late spring, Mrs. Halliwell, who was reading a letter just received from Alfred, appeared to fall into a reverie, now musing, now referring to the letter.

"What are you puzzled about, mamma?" asked Lucy.

"I am not puzzled, child, but I was thinking."

"Of what?"

"That it is unkind of us, as Alfred says, to suffer him to be there so long alone."

"When Alfred left, you promised him that you would go yourself, mamma," returned Lucy.

"Ay," she answered, in a somewhat curious tone, "I did say so, but I must visit by deputy. Children, I think you must have noticed that I am breaking fast."

"Breaking, mamma!" almost merrily exclaimed Lucy; "you are only two or three and fifty. People don't break till they are seventy."

"Painful disorders—and incurable—come on at all ages, Lucy."

"But you have none," was Lucy's answer. "You look as well as ever, and your colour is as bright and beautiful."

Hester, however, sat in awestruck silence, looking at her mother.

"My dears," said Mrs. Halliwell, "I am not well. I have known it some time."

Hester rose and approached her mother. "Dearest mamma," she said, in low tones, which she compelled to calmness, "if you have reason to suspect that anything is the matter with you, let us know it. What," she added, more quickly, as a recollection suddenly came over her—"what did Mr. Davis want here yesterday? Was it only a call? I thought so."

"I sent privately for him, Hester," returned Mrs. Halliwell.

"Oh, mamma!" interrupted Lucy, bursting into tears, for she was very excitable, "tell us what it is."

"If you will not be foolish, I will tell you. Indeed, it is nothing to be alarmed at. I may live many years. Hester, you are looking frightened also. I did not mean to alarm you, only to give you a reason for my not going out visiting. I suppose I have introduced my subject too abruptly."

"Mamma," said Hester, very quietly, "you are keeping us in suspense."

"Children, I have heart disease. I have long thought that this fluttering which comes on, and this difficulty of breathing, with other symptoms, must have something to do with the heart. I sent yesterday for Mr. Davis, and he confirms my opinion."

"There are many sorts of heart disease," breathed Hester. "Which——"

"He called it dilatation of the heart," interrupted Mrs. Halliwell, "combined with another long word which I really cannot remember. Hyper—something—it began."

"Did Mr. Davis say there was any danger?"

"No immediate danger whatever. I may live, as I told you, many years. It will, however, no doubt, cause my death at last."

In spite of her self-control, Hester burst into tears. "Oh, mother! you have taken away all the happiness that was left to me."

"Hester! do not speak like that. See how calm I am. My dear children, if we are to be thus afflicated at the mention of death, how shall we be fit to meet it when it comes to us? Have you both profited so little by your childhood's hymn?"

"What hymn?" sobbed Lucy.

"'Teach me to live, that I may dread
The grave as little as my bed.'

My darling children, until we acquire this peace within us, it is impossible that we can be happy. I trust it is mine: let that console you. In time I pray that it may be yours."

"What did Mr. Davis say?" asked Hester.

"He only confirmed my own suspicions and detailed the nature of the disease. I must live an absolutely quiet life, be very abstemious and regular; and for other remedies that may be necessary, he will order them, as occasion shall arise. There was no reason, he assured me, why I should not make an old woman yet, provided I took care of myself. But now you see," she added, smiling, "why I may not go galloping over the country to pay visits, as you young ones may."

"Mamma," said Hester, "if you could be removed quietly, by easy stages, to Chelson, the change might benefit you."

"No, my dear, it would be sure to do me harm, let me travel as quietly as I would. My going from home is out

of the question; so it must be one of you. Now, which shall it be?"

"Lucy, of course," observed Hester.

"Hester, not me," said Lucy. "I would not leave you, mamma."

They had both spoken at once, and a friendly dispute ensued. Neither would leave Mrs. Halliwell; and she sat and laughed at them. The knowledge of her state did not seem to affect her spirits in the least.

"I think you must let me decide," she interposed at length.

"You had better, mamma. If one of us must really go."

"Then I say Hester," rejoined Mrs. Halliwell. "Alfred is so incapable of anything like domestic management that I dare say his house and its affairs—what is the French word for it, Lucy? we have no good one—have never been set going in proper order yet. And, as Hester excels in these things, and you do not, Lucy, she had better go."

Thus it was decided. And the last week in May Hester left Seaford for Chelson.

There was no rail to the place in those days, only three stage-coaches, and she started by the early one. The glistening dew was still on the fields, the birds were singing, the hedge-flowers opening, and the various points of the landscape, as they drove on, stood out, clear and lovely, against the morning sky. Her fellow-passengers were two pleasant, elderly ladies, who pressed egg sandwiches upon her. She asked them if they knew Chelson. Yes, they answered, they lived within a few miles of it; it was a pretty place, but contained a good many Dissenters.

"There are two churches," Hester eagerly observed: "St. Stephen's and St. Paul's."

"But they have been so badly managed that a great many have seceded from them to become Dissenters," one of the

ladies replied. "There's some rare fun going on at Chelson just now, though, as we heard a few days ago in a letter."

"What is it?" inquired Hester.

"They have a new clergyman at one of the churches, I forget which, and the ladies are turning his head with attention and flattery. It is a hot pursuit with them; Chelson has not been so lively for years. It is sure to be the case where there is a bachelor parson."

Hester wondered whether they could be speaking of Alfred. But she thought not; he had too much steady good sense for anything of this sort.

At four o'clock she reached Chelson, and was surprised to find no one waiting for her at the coach-office. A porter took charge of her luggage, and showed her the way to the Vicarage. The church, an old grey building, covered with moss, lay very low; a descent of several steps led to the churchyard, and the Vicarage was close to it, the long, weedy grass touching the walls of the house. The porter halted his truck at the steps, and shouldered one of the boxes, whilst Hester went down, crossed the churchyard, and knocked at the Vicarage door.

"If this house is not damp——" began Hester to herself; but stopped in surprise, for at least a dozen heads appeared at one of the windows, peeping at her. She thought the porter had made a mistake.

"Are you sure this is St. Stephen's Vicarage? The Reverend Alfred Halliwell's?" she hastily asked.

"Oh, quite sure, ma'am," he replied, smiling at the idea of his being mistaken, and probably following the bent of her thoughts, for he added: "I think the new vicar have got his sewing-party to-day."

"Sewing-party!" uttered Hester.

"The ladies meets at his house once a week, miss, and makes clothes for the poor."

The door was flung open by a middle-aged woman in black, with spectacles on her nose, and grey hair sticking out untidily. Mr. Halliwell appeared behind her. And then Hester found there had been a mistake, either in her mother's wording of her letter, or in his reading of it, for he had not expected her till the evening coach at nine o'clock.

The luggage was put into the passage—a very narrow one—and then Mr. Halliwell introduced her to the parlour. Fifteen or sixteen ladies, of various ages up to five and thirty, sat round a table, piled up with calico, flannel, and coloured prints. "My eldest sister," said he. "Mrs. Zink, Miss Dewisson, Miss——"

Hester heard no more. She thought she should have been smothered. The whole bevy started up and surrounded her. Mrs. Zink, a stout lady of fifty, the wife of a professional man in Chelson, was the only married lady present. She offered to chaperon Hester upstairs, and Alfred thanked her.

It was a poor, old-fashioned house, containing five rooms besides the kitchen, which was built at the back. The ceilings were miserably low: Hester could touch the beams with her hand. There were two small sitting-rooms, a drawing-room and dining-room—one on either side the door; two bedrooms over—Mr. Halliwell's and the one meant for Hester; and one room above in the roof.

"What a number of bonnets!" exclaimed Hester, when she came in view of the bed.

"My dear Miss Halliwell, I hope you will excuse it," said Mrs. Zink—it struck Hester as being the oddest name she had ever heard. "We have been in the habit of putting our things there, on the Tuesday afternoons, and although the room was made ready for you, we did the same to-day. Indeed, there was no other place. The dining-room has the tea laid out in it, and of course the young ladies would

rather be flayed alive than invade the privacy of the vicar's bedroom. Did you wonder at seeing so many here, all at work ?"

"A little, at first," answered Hester.

"Ah ! your dear brother has had the labour of a horse before him. The parish was in the most neglected state when he came to it ; religion and morality were not thought of amongst the poor, and the children were a race of heathens. What Mr. Halliwell would have done without us, I don't know. We have organized everything for him : schools and book-clubs, and district-visiting ladies, and coal-and-provident meetings, and sewing-for-the-poor societies, and all other requisites, so that he really has no trouble, except his Sunday duties."

"But—pardon me—if the lady-parishioners are so very kind as to accomplish this good, of themselves, why could they not have done it in the time of the last vicar, or at least have prevented things from getting as you describe ?"

"My dear Miss Halliwell, there must be a head : your brother has to be referred to on all occasions. In any little doubt or difficulty we fly to him, and indeed we never like to hold a meeting unless he is present. Now, Mr. Clarke, the last vicar (a very good old soul, in the abstract), was as deaf as a post and a martyr to rheumatism. There would have been no satisfaction in working for him. For the last five years of his life he had to be dragged into church by Betty and the beadle, and did all the duty from the reading-desk."

"Is my brother liked here ?" Hester ventured to inquire.

"Liked ! he is adored," returned Mrs. Zink. "And the greatest pleasure we enjoy is looking after his domestic comforts. He seems to have as much notion of home-management as the curate at the other church has of preaching."

"He was always deficient in that sort of usefulness," remarked Hester. "I think clergymen frequently are."

"Ah, poor things!" aspirated Mrs. Zink. "These inexperienced saints of clergymen are like doves, pecked at by every raven that comes near them, in the shape of tradespeople and servants. And they fall into snares so unsuspiciously! Would you believe that your brother was actually going to retain the late vicar's female servant?"

"Indeed," answered Hester, not quite knowing what she might be expected to say.

"To be sure, she is no beauty, and she is turned five and forty," went on Mrs. Zink. "It is Betty, who opened the door for you, the sexton's sister. He could not understand why she would not do for him, as she had done for the late vicar. But I, and Mrs. Farley, and Mrs. Dewisson, and Mrs. Hook, and a few more, stepped privately up here, and pointed out to Mr. Halliwell that there was a wide difference between old Clarke, going on for eighty and no teeth, and a handsome young man like himself. There certainly *might* not have been any scandal talked in the parish, and I shall never forget the unsuspicious young vicar's astonished looks at our hinting that it was possible; but we told him that it was better to steer wide and clear, and give it a distant berth. So, until now, nobody has lived in the house with him but the sexton's son Jim, an extremely handy young man of one and twenty."

"Then has my brother no maidservant?" inquired Hester, wondering where Mrs. Zink's communications would end.

"He has taken her on now, in expectation of your arrival; she came in yesterday. A frightful amount of dirt and dust, she has just told me, she found in the house, especially in Jim's bedroom in the roof."

"I fear it must have been rather awkward, both for my

brother and the young man, to contrive for themselves without a woman-servant," said Hester, not agreeing in the least with the nonsense Mrs. Zink had been talking.

"We have all been proud to do what we could for our dear pastor. When he is dining at home we send him in some little dainty—a custard pudding, or a plate of maccaroni, or some raspberry cream—for Jim's skill in cooking only extends to chops and potatoes. But he rarely puts Jim's cooking to the test; he is constantly invited out by one parishioner or another; they quarrel who shall have him. *I* secured him for the Sunday," added Mrs. Zink, triumphantly. "I knew how it would be, the instant I set eyes on him—that every soul would be wanting to snap him up. So I made hay while the sun shone, and engaged him for every Sunday in the year, all the fifty-two, for dinner and tea.—Now, Fanny! what do you want?"

A pleasant-looking girl had entered, humming a tune. She was Mrs. Zink in miniature, very garrulous and positive.

"Tea is ready, mamma; and Mr. Halliwell says will you come and make it?"

Mrs. Zink turned to Hester. "We are having tea early, but it refreshes us. Shall I preside for you this evening, or would you prefer——"

"Oh, if you please, I would much rather you did," interrupted Hester. "They are all strange to me."

"Then I'll go on.—Fanny, have you finished that pinafore?"

"No, mamma," answered Fanny, with a gesture of impatience. "I have turned it over to Matilda; she will do that and her own work too."

"The most easy job I could find, all straight sewing, and you give it up!" cried Mrs. Zink, angrily. "I don't know what is to become of you, Fanny. It is a blessing that Matilda is domesticated and industrious."

"Is she, though?" ejaculated Miss Fanny Zink, in a whisper, nodding her head after her mother, as the latter went downstairs. "Do you like plain sewing, Miss Halliwell?"

"I like it very well," was Hester's reply, "and often have a good deal to do."

"Well, I would as soon be put in the pillory. Mamma brings me here on Tuesday afternoons, and I enjoy coming myself, for the fun of it, but I don't do a stitch more than I can avoid. I call it a most detestable mania that they have got up since the new vicar came."

"If you so much dislike work, you should leave it for those who are fond of it," smiled Hester.

"None of them are. It's all put on. And if it were not for—something—they would not do any. Look at Matilda; she would not touch a needle at home, if she were paid for it, though she does come here, and sits nose to knees for hours without stirring. I can't, so it's of no use pretending."

Hester had made herself ready by this time, and they went down to the dining-room. Not the one where the sewing was. A very handsome tea was set out, Mrs. Zink presiding. The cups and saucers were blue and gold, and a small fringed damask napkin was on each plate. Bread-and-butter, rolls, biscuits, watercress, radishes, marmalade, potted tongue, damson cheese, and a large jug of cream. Hester saw it with astonishment; if her brother had thought to provide one half of this, his housekeeping talents must have wonderfully improved.

What they seemed to want most was room. And how the chairs for eighteen were stowed into that little parlour must ever remain a mystery. Not many could sit round the table; the rest put their chairs where they could, face to face, or back to back, as they would go in, and held

their plates on their laps. When Betty or Jim came in with fresh supplies of hot water, it was taken from them at the door, for there was no getting inside. Jim seemed to enjoy the party as much as any one ; there was a good-humoured laugh on his face, which never left it. He was a simple-minded young man, very anxious to please, and in bodily fear of his aunt Betty. But to see the attentions lavished by the ladies upon their minister was amazing ! "Mr. Halliwell, let me give you a little marmalade. I know it is good, for I made it with my own hands." "Oh, Mr. Halliwell, allow me to spread it for you." "Dear Mr. Halliwell, do taste the potted tongue ! Now, I superintended it myself, and there's just the flavour of spice you like." "Mr. Halliwell, I am peeling these radishes for you, and you must eat them. I will answer for their being fresh, for I pulled them out of our own garden." "Just look, Mr. Halliwell, what a beautiful piece of damson cheese ! I have cut it for you. Mamma prides herself upon her damson cheese, and I always assist with it." "My dear, good Mr. Halliwell, I beg your pardon ! I did not perceive your cup was empty. Permit me to pass it." And this kept on all tea-time, so that by the time it was over, the Reverend Alfred Halliwell, who was naturally diffident, had a face as red as the radishes.

They turned to the sewing again afterwards, and left about half-past eight o'clock, he escorting them. Hester then went into the kitchen, and asked Betty for a candle, thinking she would have a look round her brother's bedroom, and see if things were comfortable for him.

"Good gracious ! " she uttered, when she found herself there. She had never seen such a room : the state it was in would have turned her mother crazy. Mrs. Halliwell used to reproach Alfred with never keeping his drawers straight ; she should have seen these, inside and out.

"Ah, miss, you may well stare," said Betty, who had followed her. "When I first see this room yesterday, I threw up my hands and eyes. And when I spoke to the master about it, he looked round as if he see it then for the first time. But he did say that he never could find his things when he wanted them. Wouldn't I like to have the shaking of that Jim!"

"My brother never does see anything but his books and pens," said Hester. "What are all these things rolled up here?"

"Clean shirts which have got the buttons off," responded Betty. "It have been master's plan, I hear, when he have put on a shirt and found a button gone, to tug it off again and cram it anyways into the drawers, or toss it on the top, so that I believe he have not got above a couple of shirts to wear. As if that Jim could not have folded them up after him; and sewed the buttons on too, if he liked, the proud monkey! Them are stockings, miss, and they have no fellows that I can see, and there ain't one in the whole stock but have nine or ten holes in it as big as half a crown."

"They will never mend!" exclaimed Hester, looking at stocking after stocking in dismay.

"Not to much account," answered Betty. "Mr. Jim ought to be made to pay for new ones. He might have bought some darning-cotton and a needle, and caught up the holes, not have let 'em go on to this. I took a pair down yesterday, after master went out to dinner at five, and when he come home at half after ten I hadn't got through the first. And oh, miss, you should have seen Jim's room in the roof! He had been a-cutting up of wood in it, and never cleared up the chips, and drops of tallow was splashed on the boards, and a hole burnt in one corner of the sheet. I'd put Master Jim in a

press-gang for two months and make him work, if I had my will."

"Where did this come from?" inquired Hester, espying a handsome white satin pin-cushion on the dressing-table. "And what pretty scent-bottles!"

"They come from one or another of 'em," replied Betty. "I dare say Jim knows which. It have been as good as a theatre-play to him."

"From one or another of what?" repeated Hester, not understanding.

"From the young ladies what's after master. The house is full of their presents. You just wait till to-morrow morning, miss, you'll see something then. Why, miss, there ain't one of that sixteen what was here to-night but is ready to rush into his arms, whether he'll open them or not. All them niceties you saw on the table for tea was brought here by one or t'other of them: pretending to master that they had made the jams and things themselves, that he might get thinking what a useful wife they'd make him. The cups and saucers was lent by Mrs. Zink—she's a deep one, she is—and them fringed cloths on the plates was give by Mrs. Dove. When they first got up these sewing-parties they held 'em at their own houses, by turns. And what made 'em propose to hold 'em at the Vicarage? Why, because master should be present, for that's all they care for, not for the sewing or the poor; and they couldn't for shame ask him to a stitching-meeting. The mothers be more cunning than the daughters, and that's a fact, ma'am. I wonder master ain't druv clean off his head with the two. Here comes master! He is soon home to-night."

Hester quitted the room with Betty, leaving it as it was until morning. "Where do you sleep?" she inquired.

"Up there, miss, in the attic."

"I thought that was Jim's room."

"Jim left when I came in, ma'am. He is to come of a day, to fetch and carry messages. The notes master has to send the ladies, in answer to their'n, is enough to exercise Jim's legs."

When Hester made her appearance in the drawing-room the following morning, she wondered what in the world had come to it. The back of every chair was decorated with a white netted covering. And not only the chairs, but the arms of the sofa, and also the two stools, which were not of common horsehair, like the rest of the furniture, but elegant pieces of embroidery in floss silks. She had never met with these white things before; in time they became universal, but her opinion is that Chelson gave rise to the fashion, for she saw none anywhere else for years afterwards.

"I knew you would be dazed, ma'am," cried Betty in triumph. "I had got 'em in the wash-tub yesterday. They was pretty black when I came, for this room smokes like anything, and I sat up to dry and finish 'em after you went to bed."

"What do you call them? What are they for?" asked Hester, pleased with the unusual sight.

"Well, ma'am, they ain't of no use, they are for ornament; they gets tumbled, and they gets on the floor, and the cotton fluff from 'em gets on to the gentlemen's clothes. I calls 'em chair-sacks, but that ain't the quality name. There's a set for master's bedroom, which haven't been put on yet; and Jim did hear, miss," added Betty, dropping her voice to a mysterious whisper, "that the ladies was a consulting whether they might not do some to put on the pulpit cushions."

Hester was admiring them still, for they gave a light, pretty appearance to the low, dark room and its plain furniture, when her brother entered.

"How gay you are, Alfred!" she said.

"Gay! Oh, with these antimacassars. A senseless name for them, insinuating that we all use hair-oil."

"Who made them?"

"Miss—let me see—Miss Dewisson, I think it was, made this set."

"Betty says there are some for your bedroom."

"Yes. Emma Farley made those. You had better put them in yours. I have not used them."

"And who worked you these foot-stools, Alfred?"

"Oh, that was a joint-stock affair, I believe. Five or six joined and presented them."

The Vicarage was inundated that day with callers, so that its inmates could hardly take their early dinner in peace. The visits were ostensibly to Hester, but she thought they were really meant for Alfred. One of them, Miss Butler, who came with her aunt, left a thin parcel of tissue-paper in Mr. Halliwell's hands, expressing a hope that he would find the contents useful. He opened it as soon as she was gone.

"Look here, Hester! What am I to do with these?"

It was a pair of fine bands, hem-stitched and trimmed round with a narrow sort of lace, worked by hand.

"Of course you cannot wear them," was Hester's astonished reply. "I never heard of any bands but plain ones being worn. What possesses all the ladies you have come amongst?"

Mr. Halliwell laughed. "I never met with so good-natured a set as these Chelson people," he said. "They have quite overwhelmed me with kindness and attention ever since I came to the place."

But to Hester the motive for all these presents, this religious zeal, was sufficiently evident. She, the looker-on, saw more of the real game than those who played it.

"I wonder where this will end?" sighed she. "It seems

to me that you are running blindfold, to meet them half-way."

Alfred Halliwell remained silent. Perhaps his conscience a little smote him. Or he may have felt irrevocably fallen into the meshes of the Chelson maids and matrons, and was powerless to extricate himself.

CHAPTER X.

MISS ZINK'S HYSTERICS.

THERE seemed to Hester to be no end of work in the parish; much more than there need have been, to bring forth so little result. A treat was in agitation for the Sunday-school children, and a dozen meetings were held to consult about it, Mr. Halliwell in the chair, and the ladies around him. Meanwhile, he and Hester were invited to a grand evening party at Mrs. Zink's. But when the evening came Hester had to go alone, for he was called out to a sick parishioner.

They were up in arms when she entered by herself—the whole room. Oh, where was Mr. Halliwell? What was the matter? Was Mr. Halliwell not coming?

"Who is it that has sent for him?" inquired Mrs. Zink, when Hester explained.

"Sally Davis, I think Jim said," she answered.

"There! that old creature is always being taken ill!" uttered Mrs. Zink. "Do you remember, at the Joneses' party in the Christmas week, when we were all so comfortable, dancing a quiet quadrille on the carpet, a message came from Sally Davis that she feared she should not live till the morning, and dear Mr. Halliwell was forced to go to Back Lane through all the cold in his thin shoes? She is never contented but when she is having prayers read to her. They ought to put her into the workhouse."

"I hope my brother will never feel his duties irksome," Hester ventured to observe; "and I think he will not."

Just then a young gentleman swung into the room with a discontented air, and dropped into a vacant chair next to Hester. "I say," he whispered to her, "is not this precious slow?"

"Do you think so?" she politely replied.

"What has taken the parson, that he is not here yet? Do you know?"

"Mr. Halliwell has been called out to some one who is ill," said Hester. "He may not be able to come at all."

"My! you don't mean that! Won't they be savage! That serves ma right, for not letting me go boating. Because some of us fellows upset a skiff the other day, and got a ducking, she swore I should never go near the water again. We had made up a jolly rowing party for this evening, and when I was stealing off to it, she pounced upon me in the hall, and we had a regular quarrel. I told her I would go; so she laid hold of me, and hallooed out for the governor, who came out of the office and put in his word, and they made me dress and come in here."

"Are you Master Zink?"

"I am Mister Zink, if you please," returned the young gentleman. "When a fellow's going on for seventeen, I should think that's old enough to be Mister. I say, though, isn't it a game about the parson? They have been mad over this blow-out: trying on dresses, figuring off before the glass, practising songs; all for him. And now he doesn't show. By Jove! if it's not good! There's more fuss made with that parson than with all Chelson."

"Who is that?" inquired Hester, thinking it might be well to turn the conversation, and directing his attention to a quiet-looking girl in lilac muslin.

"That! That's Mab."

"Who, sir?"

"Mabel Zink, my sister. The missis" (Mister Zink's familiar name for his mother) "keeps her in the background, till Mat and Fan are got off. I say, how old should you think Mat is?"

"I heard your mother say that Miss Zink was turned twenty."

"And a jolly long turn, too. She was twenty-seven last birthday, and Fan's going on for twenty-five. Why, Mabel's twenty!"

"But don't you think we might talk about something else?" interposed Hester. "Your sisters may not like to have their ages discussed."

"They can lump it. Mat and Fan magged out as loud as the missis against my going boating, but I said if they made me come in here I'd spoil sport. They fight and scratch each other about the new parson—metaphorically, you know; but they'd like to do it in earnest, if it could be kept from his ears. The missis favours Matilda, because she's the eldest, and it is her turn to go off first; but he may have the pick of the two, I can tell you."

"Are you fond of singing?" questioned Hester, hoping that might divert the young gentleman.

"Yes, I am, over the left," retorted Mister Zink. "I get rather too much of it for that. Mat and Fan are squalling against time from morning till night, since they found out the parson had a voice. I told them to-day that if they thought to hook him by noise, they might find themselves in the wrong box, for which I had to make a bolt. I wish he had never come near the place, I do."

"I am sorry he should be so unfortunate as to have displeased you."

"It is so naggering, you see," proceeded Mister Zink. "A fellow was left free as a hare before, but deuce a bit of

that now. One halloos out, 'Tray, go and change those dirty boots; Mr. Halliwell's coming to tea.' Then the other screams, 'Tray, for goodness' sake go and make yourself decent! what an object you are! your head's like a mop! we expect Mr. Halliwell.' Last night we had a sharp dispute over it. I wanted Tom Fisher in; they said rude chaps like Tom Fisher were not society for the parson, and wouldn't let him come. So I walked myself out, and never came in till half-past eleven, and got a rowing from the missis and the governor. And one dare not leave as much as a flea in the drawing-room. I put a fishing-rod in the corner the other day, and they squealed after me as if it had been a serpent: 'Now, Tray, don't bring these things here! we can't have this room made into a litter; Mr. Halliwell may be calling.' I thought a parson was a peaceable man. I should be ashamed if I were one, to cause the rumpus in a house that he does in this."

"But, really," urged Hester, "it appears to me that the 'rumpus' is not his fault."

"Well, I know I'm sick of it, and I wish he would marry one of the girls, and put a stop to the humbugging. I shouldn't care whether it was one of my sisters or anybody else's—though precious glad I should be for those two eldest to cut it out of here. Shall you try for him, now you are come?"

He put the question so quaintly, in a joke, as Hester supposed, that she could not forbear laughing.

"If you don't, you'll be an exception to everybody here. I'm sick of the idiots. I think Mab's making up to him, on the sly. And I suppose Amy would, if she had the chance."

"Who is Amy?" questioned Hester.

"She's next to Fan—between her and Mabel. She lives at my old aunt's, and never comes to Chelson. The

governor's aunt, you know; as cranky an old creature as ever was known. I wonder Amy can put up with her; but she ought to give thanks to be out of here, just now. There's the same row going on in the other houses over the parson that there is in this. Have you not twigged it at Mother Farley's?"

"I have not been to Mrs. Farley's yet," answered Hester.

"Not been—— Why, who do you mean to say you are, if you are not living there? Aren't you the little Farleys' new governess?"

"No, I am Mr. Halliwell's sister: staying at the Vicarage."

"Oh, my eye!" exclaimed the young gentleman with emphasis, as he stared at Hester with a blank look of amazement. "Well, I have put my foot in it! I'll make myself scarce. Not that I care, ma'am, if you do tell the parson," he added, coming back again after springing from his seat. "The missis and the girls will believe me, for another time, that when I say I'll spoil sport I mean to do it."

He crossed the room to his sister Mabel, telling her, no doubt, of his awkward mistake, for her face turned crimson as she glanced at Hester. Presently he commenced to drag her across the room towards Hester. "Now, Tracy! now Mabel!" exclaimed Mrs. Zink, "what are you about?"

For answer, Master Tracy pushed his sister into the chair he had vacated by Hester, and in the bustle of this, Mr. Halliwell came in. He was rapturously received, and requested to "sit here," and "sit there," but he drew a chair near to his sister and Mabel.

"How is it you never come to the working parties?" he asked of the latter.

She blushed so prettily that she quite won Hester's heart

—indeed, she seemed to do nothing but blush—and glanced at Mr. Halliwell with her shy eyes. "Mamma thinks Matilda and Fanny enough to go—that I should only be in the way. And perhaps she is right, for I do not like work."

"You are very different from every one else in Chelson," remarked Mr. Halliwell. "They like nothing so well."

"I like fancy-work," said Mabel.

"And music?" asked Hester.

"Oh yes, and music. I like that better than anything. I wanted to make acquaintance with you before, Miss Halliwell, but they would not give me the opportunity. I wish you would invite me to spend an evening all alone with you at the Vicarage. Mamma and my sisters will never bring me of their own accord."

"Come to-morrow evening," interrupted Mr. Halliwell.

"Oh, if I might!" she uttered, clasping her hands with the prettiest expression of helplessness. "If you could only get leave for me, Miss Halliwell."

Music was introduced after tea. Nearly every one in the room sang, excepting Hester and Mabel. Hester could not, and Mabel was not asked. When Hester requested permission for her to visit them the following evening, Mrs. Zink seemed inclined to substitute Matilda, but Hester pressed for Mabel.

Accordingly, the next afternoon, Mabel went to the Vicarage. Hester was really charmed with her; she thought her a very nice girl, her manners simple and winning. They persuaded her to sing, though they had no instrument, and Hester was astonished at her voice. It was of rare quality, and had been well trained.

"The school treat is arranged at last," remarked Mr. Halliwell, in the course of the evening. "It is to be next Monday, in Clebbery Ground. The children will enjoy

themselves in the open air so much more than in the confined schoolroom. Clebbery——"

"Do not tell me about it," interrupted Mabel, in an earnest, almost impassioned tone. "It will only make me long to go."

"But you will go, will you not?" said Mr. Halliwell.

Mabel shook her head. "I am not allowed to go out with Matilda and Fanny. It is hard to be put aside for them always, and I feel it." She raised her charming blue eyes to his for one moment as she spoke, and when they dropped, their eyelashes were glistening with tears.

At eight o'clock a servant arrived for Miss Mabel. When she was ready the vicar said he would walk with her.

"Oh no, indeed, thank you," she returned, colouring crimson; "pray do not think of taking *me*."

"Why not?" he inquired.

"If it were any one but me—of course—but they will say I have no right to monopolize your time or to give you trouble."

He laughed, and drew her arm through his, and Hester watched them across the churchyard, the maid following.

The next Monday rose delightfully, and amidst the many faces assembled in the schoolroom ready for the departure to Clebbery Ground (a rural spot at a convenient distance from Chelson, much used for picnics) Hester saw that of Mabel Zink.

"Oh, thank you, Miss Halliwell!" she whispered; "it is all owing to your message that I am here. Mr. Halliwell gave it to mamma, so she could not do otherwise than let me come."

Hester did not remember to have sent any message; but she thought it very kind of Alfred to beg for Mabel.

The younger children went in a large covered waggon with the provisions; the elder walked, as did all the visitors

—a great number of them. They arrived there about twelve, amused themselves for an hour or two, and then had dinner. Afterwards they dispersed, some to one part of the grounds, some to another. Mrs. Zink took her station in a grotto, and went to sleep; Hester sat on the felled stump of a tree outside it, her memory wandering back to bygone years, years that for her never would return. Suddenly they were both startled: Mrs. Zink out of her sleep, and Hester out of her waking dreams, for Miss Zink came flying up in a state of excitement, darted into the grotto, sank down on the seat by her mother, and went into screaming hysterics.

"What in the name of fortune is it?" uttered the alarmed Mrs. Zink. "What has come to you, Matilda?"

The young lady made no answer, but shrieked and kicked so violently that Mrs. Zink seized her by the head and Hester caught hold of her feet.

"Have you been stung by anything?" asked the wondering Mrs. Zink.

"Yes, that's it!" screamed Matilda.

"Where were you stung? Was it a wasp?"

"It was a man!" shrieked Matilda.

"A man! Good patience, Matilda! What can you mean?"

"A man and a sister," persisted Miss Zink. "Oh, the wickedness! oh, the treachery!"

"Has Fanny done anything?"

"Fanny! I wish it had been Fanny. It is that sly, smooth Mabel. I told you not to let her come. I went into that opening by the beeches, and there" (shriek) "I caught them together, making love." (Shriek, shriek.) "He was kissing her" (shriek, shriek, shriek), "he was, mother, as true as we are here!" (shriek, shriek, shriek, shriek).

"I'll lock Mabel up, my dear, as soon as we get her home. Who was kissing her? Mr. Spriggs?"

"Not *that* stupid Simon! he never kisses anybody. It was Mr. Halliwell. Some one ought to write to his bishop."

Mrs. Zink screamed in echo of her daughter, and Hester was so petrified that she let go Miss Zink's feet.

"I never heard of anything so demoralizing as for a parson to kiss," sobbed Miss Matilda. "I wonder where he learnt it? Not in the Commandments. He had his arm round her, and his face glued to hers. Emma Farley and Augusta Dove saw it as well. Of course he will never attempt to face us from the pulpit again! He must buy a mask."

"I don't believe it," cried Mrs. Zink, who had been collecting her scattered senses. "You must have seen double, Matilda."

"We saw single enough," replied the young lady, roughly. "After everything we have done for him! run and worked ourselves to death over disgusting parish business—contaminated our fingers, sewing for those grubs of charity children—had him to our house at all hours and all meals—learnt new songs for him—worn new dresses for him—and to be served in this treacherous way! to be despised and deserted for that little wretch of a Mabel!"

With the last words Miss Zink recommenced her dance. Hester thought she would leave the grotto, and was gliding from it when she saw her brother approaching with Mabel on his arm.

"Hester," he sang out, "do you happen to know where Mrs. Zink is?"

"She is here."

"Don't come in!" screamed Matilda, as they drew near the entrance; "don't contaminate us with your presence. Oh, you false—thieves!"

Hester was not sufficiently collected to note all that passed; but she heard her brother say that Mabel had promised to be his wife, provided her parents had no objection. It was Miss Matilda, he intimated, who had caused him to speak so soon; otherwise he should have chosen another time and place.

To describe the discomfiture of the picnic party when the news spread would be a difficult task. To have shaken their vicar in a bag might have relieved their feelings in a measure; but to shake Mabel to the bottom of the sea and leave her there would have relieved them more effectually. Mrs. Zink alone was composed; when her disappointment about Matilda went off, she subsided into a quiet glow of triumph. She *had* secured him; if not for one daughter, for another.

A Mrs. Rice came up to Hester, and spoke in confidential tones. "She is the most unsuitable wife your brother could have chosen; and I am not actuated by *their* motives, Miss Halliwell, in saying so, for my girls are under ten. Mabel Zink ought to marry a rich man, who could keep her in idleness; for she is an incapable do-nothing, and she will never be anything else. He had better have taken Matilda."

"Mabel is young," rejoined Hester.

"Quite old enough to have distanced the others in the race," quoth Mrs. Rice, significantly. "She laid her plans deeper than any of them, and she has won."

"Mabel Zink never strove to win Alfred!" uttered Hester.

"So you may think," answered Mrs. Rice. "I have seen a good deal, living, as I do, next door to the Zinks, and always running in and out. Mabel was kept back by her mother, but she put herself forward. She would steal an interview with your brother in the hall and chatter to him;

she would meet him out-of-doors; in fact, they were always meeting; and she would put on her pretended shy, attractive, modest ways. I heard her invite herself to your house that evening, and saw through it. Not a young lady in Chelson has laboured more assiduously to catch him than has Mabel Zink."

The words troubled Hester greatly, but she only remarked that she hoped Mabel would make a good wife.

"Not in the prudent sense of the word," observed Mrs. Rice. "Mabel can spend money, but she has no idea of saving it by domestic management. Why, she could not iron a pocket-handkerchief, or scarcely hem one. And she will have no fortune; it is well-known that the old lawyer lives up to his income—some say beyond it. Rely upon it, this is the worst day's work she and your brother ever did. To choose each other is to prepare for struggles and poverty."

A curious recollection darted into Hester's mind then—of the life of struggle promised to them all by her Aunt Copp. She felt very sad, and an impulse she could not restrain urged her to speak to Mabel, who happened to draw near as Mrs. Rice walked away.

"My dear Mabel," she began, "I fear you and my brother ought not to think of marrying, at least at present. Do you know how very small his living is?"

"Two or three hundred a year."

"Two or three hundred a year!" echoed Hester. "Where can you have received so false an estimate of his income? They call it one hundred and seventy pounds, but there are outgoings, and it does not bring him in more than one hundred and fifty pounds, if as much!"

"Oh, that's plenty!" cried Mabel. "A hundred and fifty! It is more than we can spend. And there's the house as well."

"You do not know the value and uses of money. You——"

"Yes, I do," interrupted Mabel. "Mamma always allows me fifteen pounds a year for my dress, and I have to eke it out by all sorts of contrivances."

"Dear Mabel, there are expenses in a married life which you little foresee or think of, and they come on very soon. Pray believe that I am full of love, both to you and Alfred, when I suggest that you should reconsider matters, and look to consequences."

"It will be quite fun to economize. I shall like it. As good as our gipsy party to-day. You know we had to drink out of each other's glasses."

"No, Mabel, it will not be fun. You will find that you have plunged yourselves into difficulty and trial."

The nearest approach to a pout or frown that Hester had seen on Mabel Zink's face appeared then. "You are dissatisfied with me, Miss Halliwell; you wish he had chosen Emma Farley, or Mary Hook, or perhaps Matilda! You detest me for winning him, and you don't like me at all."

"My dear Mabel," said Hester, vexed to be misconstrued, "the very fact of my speaking thus to you, proves that I like and esteem you; otherwise my remonstrance would have been made to Alfred. I only ask you to reflect, to deliberate, and I urge it for your sake rather than his; for in a home of poverty the daily crosses and privations fall more heavily upon the wife than the husband."

"There's nothing to deliberate upon," was Mabel's impatient answer as she escaped from Hester. "Mr. Halliwell's living is plenty to begin upon, and he is sure to get a better one in time."

"Good night, Miss Halliwell," said Mrs. Hook to Hester, as they gained the town on their return and halted at that

lady's door. "A pleasant day we have had. Excuse me," she continued, lowering her voice to a whisper, "but if ever there was a Tom Noodle in this world—and he must forgive my saying it—it is your brother, for being taken in by that sly cat of a Mabel Zink."

"I wish you a good evening, ma'am," stiffly said Mrs. Dewisson, when they came in turn to her door, while her daughter offered Hester only one finger to shake; "present my compliments to your brother, and say I wish him joy of his bargain. And I wish Miss Matilda well through her disappointment, for she had set her whole heart and mind upon him. I hope she will not have brain fever."

"The same to you," was the cool reply, when Hester afterwards stopped to say good night to Mrs. Farley. "If every one was of my mind, Miss Halliwell, they would bring a general action against your brother for breach of promise, and I shall not hesitate to-morrow to avow my opinion publicly. What business had he to accept all the presents and the antimacassars, if he knew he had got his eye on that deceitful, die-away Mabel Zink? It would be dishonourable conduct in any man, but it is positive dishonesty in a clergyman."

Hester reached home, glad to be there, and her heart was sore in many ways. Before dinner-time the following day, notes had arrived from three and twenty ladies, begging to resign all future aid or participation in parish business. In drawing the ink towards him to write the answers, Mr. Halliwell spilled some over one of the white netted chair coverings. "It is nothing," said he, in his dreamy way.

"Put this into cold water, Betty!" said Hester, taking it into the kitchen.

And Betty hastened to take it from her, as anxious about it as she was.

"You must be careful of these, Alfred," Hester observed,

returning to the sitting-room; "you will get no more of them, or of anything else."

"No," he answered. But there was a quiet smile on his face, as if he had been more awake to the by-play carried on than Hester had given him credit for.

"No, indeed," she repeated. "When a clergyman makes known to his congregation that he has chosen a wife, let him rest assured that he will be troubled with no more antimacassars."

Mrs. Zink hurried on the wedding, and settled it to take place in August. But Hester did not wait for it; she returned home.

BOOK THE FOURTH.

CHAPTER XI.

A WEDDING.

AGAIN a few years went on at Seaford—such a few!—and Mrs. Halliwell found she was not likely to live to be old. The time was coming when she must die. She thought it was not quite so near: her daughters that it was not near at all. She kept up very well, and they saw no danger.

One evening she was reclining on the sofa, near the open window, for she loved the air of the early summer; Hester and Mary were working, and Lucy reading aloud, when Mrs. Halliwell signed to the latter to cease.

"Some one is coming towards our house," she said. "It seems like a traveller; for surely that is luggage that is following."

"A lady in deep mourning," added Mary, looking up. "Yes, she is coming towards our house. Who can it be?"

"Mamma," cried Hester, hastily, "be prepared. I fear—you will not be alarmed?"

"Hester, you know that I suffer nothing to alarm me. Speak out."

"I fear it is Aunt Copp, in widow's weeds."

Aunt Copp it proved to be. She came in, leaving

Phœbe to take care of the luggage, and sat down amidst them without a word. Throwing back her crape veil, she pointed with both hands towards her full muslin cap and burst into tears.

"Dear Aunt Copp," cried Lucy, crying too, as she took her hands, "we see it all. When did it happen?"

"I don't know that I can tell you," she answered, after relieving herself by copious sobs. "And to think that Sam never saw his poor dear father before he went! He's second officer now."

"When did it happen?" they inquired. "When we last heard, you were at Calcutta."

"Mind you, I knew the voyage would prove unlucky," said Aunt Copp, who went from one piece of news to another, in spite of her grief, and was certainly not one to bury it in silence; "for the very night after we started for home, a nasty great hulky-bulky ship came along, without lights, and stove in our bulwarks, took off the bowsprit, and ripped up the boats, and we had to put back to Sauger Roads for repair. But I said to the captain, 'You'll see: this turn will be a bad one.' And sure enough it was. Ah, me!"

"Do not tell us about it just yet, if it pains you, Aunt Copp," said Mary.

"Oh, I'll tell you. It—— Is that Mary?" she demanded, taking the first good look at her. "I can tell you all what—she's the flower of the flock. I never saw so pretty a girl."

Mary was very pretty, with her dark silky hair, her rich blue eyes, and her delicate face, that was, just now, blushing crimson.

"A graceful, elegant girl as ever I saw," continued Aunt Copp. "You must be nineteen now."

"Just nineteen," murmured Mary, who was blushing

still. "But will you not tell us, Aunt Copp—if not too painful?"

"There's not much to tell, my dear. Only that the voyage was disastrous from beginning to end. A fever broke out after our second starting; the chief officer and some of the crew died, rendering us short of hands. Then we had dreadful weather, nothing but storms and hurricanes; and my poor husband was completely worn out with fatigue, which may have rendered him more likely to take illness. We touched at the Cape; a fever was raging there; not the same sort which had attacked the ship: my husband had escaped the first, but this he caught. When we sailed away from the Cape he was sickening for it, and in a week's time, girls—oh, it's a mournful thing to tell you!—his poor dear body was sewn up, and, at sundown, plunged into the sea. I hope it escaped those horrid sharks; but"—lowering her voice to a whisper—"one was following the vessel."

"Aunt Copp," shuddered Mary, "why could you not have brought it home to be buried on land? He could have lain by poor papa."

"Bless your ignorant heart, child, we can't keep the dead on board ship. The sailors would jump into the sea first, and swim away, on the chance of being picked up. Our second officer—a very nice young fellow, who had acted as first since the chief went off—read the service over his poor body, so it's a consolation to think he had Christian burial. And he was a good man," earnestly added Aunt Copp, "for he never ill-treated one of his sailors in his life; so I am not afraid but that he is happy."

"When did you land?" asked Mrs. Halliwell.

"Only now. Our second officer brought the ship home *well;* my poor old captain could not have done it better. It's a great feather in his cap, and I have not forgotten to

mention it in his certificate. I have a world of business before me. So, as soon as I landed, after rigging myself in my new costume, which I feel most wretched in, and can't bear the sight of, I came right off to London to do it, taking you on the road, for a day or two, before I get there."

"I thought you were come for a long stay, Aunt Copp. There seemed a great deal of luggage."

"I never travel without plenty of luggage; there's no knowing what one may want. Some of it is for you. Dresses, and shawls, and I don't know what all, from Jane Pepper."

"Tell me about her," sighed Mrs. Halliwell.

"Well, I don't want to shock you, but unless Jane chooses to take heart, she'll just weep herself to death."

"Weep herself to death!" uttered Mrs. Halliwell.

"She cries morning, noon, and night. At least, she did for the last fortnight of my stay there. All the children are gone."

"*All!*"

"All three; they have followed the other two. Little sickly things they were. The one died before I got to Calcutta, and the two others while I was there. So that makes all five gone. Of course Jane frets herself into shreds over it, and to reason with her was useless. 'Five such darling children,' she kept harping upon, 'and all gone.' 'Your crying won't mend it, Jane,' I said, and with that she set on and cried the more. So I went to her husband. 'Captain Pepper,' I said (by the way, he's getting on rapidly, and expects soon to have his majority), 'do you want to bury Jane?'

"'To bury her!' he echoed, staring at me, 'what do you mean, Aunt Copp?' for, you see, that's what he has taken to call me, through hearing Jane.

"'Why, she'll just fret and stew herself into her grave at

the rate she is going on,' I answered. 'Now you had better persuade her to come with us to England. I and Captain Copp will take good care of her on the voyage' (little thinking, you know, my dears, what a voyage we were going to have), 'and it will be change of scene and change of air. She'll stop with her mother and sisters, and when she's tired of them and her health is strong, she can come back to you. Now, captain, you must just worry her till she consents, for it's the only thing.'

"'I'll try and persuade her, Aunt Copp,' said he. 'I think a voyage to England would do her good, and I have told her so.' Well, my dears, he could do nothing with her, any more than I could. Jane would not leave him; and my belief is, that though he talked to her before me, he just stopped when my back was turned. They are as fond of each other, are those two, as they were the day they married, which, as I represented to them, was perfectly unreasonable and ridiculous. However, the upshot was, that Jane let us sail without her, and I don't believe you'll get her over to Europe at all, unless he can obtain leave and come with her. So there."

"How is she looking, Rebecca?" asked Mrs. Halliwell.

"As thin as a herring. She looks ten years older than Hester."

"Oh, Aunt Copp!" exclaimed Hester.

"She really does. I don't think the climate agrees with her. And then her children have come so quickly."

"And gone again," sighed Mrs. Halliwell.

"Oh, well," said Aunt Copp, "if she could only get over the grief, the poor little things are better off."

"How is Sam?"

"I suppose he's all right; I had a letter from him when I landed at Liverpool, which was waiting there. He has gone to the Bermudas."

"I hope you are left comfortably off, Rebecca," said Mrs. Halliwell.

"Middling. It might be better and it might be worse. When things are squared up, I shall have about what the East India Company allow you—£200 a year, which, of course, will be Sam's after me. Sam has some in a lump, which I dare say he'll make ducks and drakes of as soon as he touches it. Do you know," added Aunt Copp, peering at her sister-in-law, "you are not looking well. Very ill, *I* think."

"I cannot boast of great things, Rebecca."

"And now, girls, guess where I went as I came up from Liverpool. I took somebody in my way."

"The Halliwells at Middlebury, perhaps."

"No; Alfred. I wanted to see an old shipmate of the poor captain's, who lives within a few miles of Chelson; so I thought I might as well go on, and have a look at them."

"Are they quite well?"

"Nothing to boast of. Alfred has a great deal to do, and is badly paid, and his wife has scarcely got over her last illness. At the pace they are going, they will have a score or two of children, I should say. Worse than Jane."

"How do you like her, Rebecca?"

"Pretty well. They have been married several years now, yet her management does not improve, and there's no regularity in the house; but then there's only one servant for everything, children and baby and all. I should think the confusion must drive the parson wild when writing his sermons. Mabel had a sister stopping with her for a day or two."

"Which one?" asked Hester. "Matilda or Fanny?"

"Neither. They called her Amy. A meek-tempered, soft-headed girl as I ever saw; nothing to say for herself."

"Then she is not like Hester's description of Matilda and Fanny," laughed Lucy.

"Hester," resumed Aunt Copp, going to another theme, "have you heard anything of that booby yet?"

"What booby?" exclaimed Hester.

"Your parson."

A deep flush rose to Hester's face. "No," she whispered. "Nothing."

"I hope you never will, for he was not worth it. And some of you ridiculed my cards!"

"Aunt Copp," broke in Mary, "have you told any one's fortune lately?"

"Child," said Aunt Copp, solemnly, "I have never told one since. I never will again."

"Since when?"

"That time. Before your papa died."

Somehow, that night Hester could not sleep. Since Mrs. Halliwell grew worse, she had occupied a small bed in her room, and she slipped quietly out of it, and throwing on a dressing-gown, went into the corridor. It was a lovely night. The moon, nearly at the full, was riding, clear and bright, in the dark blue sky, and Hester stood at the window, looking out. She was thinking over many things: the passage of life seemed dark for their family just then. Her mother's decay, her sister Jane's sorrow, her brother's struggles, Captain Copp's death, and—it *would* mix with the rest—doubts of the fate of George Archer. Hester's tears came, and flowed silently. "But—God is over all," she murmured, looking up at the fair expanse of sky; "as He permits it, it *must* be right." Suddenly she started and listened: was that her mother calling to her in a faint voice? Hester glided silently in again: she was not sure.

"Hester—Hester—child—where—are—you?"

"Dearest mamma, what is the matter? You cannot breathe."

"I am worse, child;" but there was still a pause between every word. "Do not alarm the house. Call Phœbe only, and let her go for Mr. Davis."

Hester did not alarm the house, but she woke them quietly. Phœbe was despatched for Mr. Davis. It was early morning when he came, and in the evening of that same day Mrs. Halliwell died.

"What a mercy that I was here!" ejaculated Aunt Copp. "My poor girls, I'll stop with you till after the funeral, and then be off to London, get over my business, and come back to you."

"Do not put yourself out of the way to return to us, Aunt Copp," said Hester, for she had a dim idea that they should manage better without her than with her; but her sorrow was too great just then to dwell upon trifles.

Alfred came to the funeral, and Mr. Halliwell of Middlebury. The mournful duties were gone through, and the business duties. It had been Mrs. Halliwell's wish that her daughters should remain in the house for a year after her death, for which she had provided. They would each then have £500, and alas! must look out for themselves, and do the best they could in life.

Aunt Copp was as good as her word, and she returned to them on the conclusion of her business in town, and a very great worry she proved to be. Desperately bustling and active, she interfered in everything.

They had three months of it, and then Aunt Copp departed. Mary had been invited to visit Mr. and Mrs. Halliwell at Middlebury, so her aunt undertook to convey her there, on her way to Liverpool, where she intended to establish her home.

Mary Halliwell's stay at Middlebury lengthened into

winter, and then she wrote to say they must not expect her until spring. However, a few days after the receipt of this letter by Hester, they were surprised by her arrival with Mr. Halliwell.

"Do you know why I have brought her to Seaford?" asked the latter.

"Because you were tired of her," laughed Hester; "which I thought you must have been, weeks ago."

"Not exactly that. Miss Mary has been engaging herself to take somebody else's name."

Hester and Lucy were too surprised to speak. Mary stood with her eyes cast down and her cheeks crimson.

"And as I look upon you, Hester, somewhat in the light of a guardian to her," proceeded Mr. Halliwell, "I thought it my duty to come and lay the case before you, ere it went any further. Mary—where's she gone to?"

Mary had escaped from the room. Hester sat down with a sigh. "There seems nothing but trouble," she breathed. "Is it a very unsuitable engagement?"

"Pray, my dear, who said it was unsuitable at all?" smiled Mr. Halliwell.

Hester considered. "I believe I inferred so from your manner—and Mary's."

"She is gone, so I'll speak out; but I don't foster her vanity by saying it before her. He is one of the nicest young fellows that ever lived; and she could not have chosen better if she had had the pick of all Middlebury."

"How you have relieved me!" exclaimed Hester. "Who is it?"

"Dr. Goring."

"A physician?"

"No, my dear," laughed Mr. Halliwell; "he is only a general practitioner: but we call them all doctors down with us. If I had a daughter, I don't know any one I

would sooner give her to than to young Goring. And I prove myself particularly disinterested in saying this, for some one else wanted Mary."

"Who?" questioned Hester.

"My son; poor Tom. She has given his heart a twinge; not purposely, for I never saw a girl with less coquetry in my life. She is an admirable girl, Hester."

"I trust she is," answered Hester, with pride.

"Tom soon found he should have no chance; so he drew in and set-to to cure himself of his love-fever. And as he went out of it, Goring went into it. She did not look with a cool eye on *him*. He is a most attractive man, as you will soon see. He is at Seaford."

"Here!"

"He travelled with us, and is stopping at the Seaford Arms. I came on to make all straight for him, and he was to follow by-and-by."

"Oh dear!" cried Hester.

"You need not say 'Oh dear!'" laughed Mr. Halliwell. "He has nothing formidable about him. You will think him the pleasantest young man you ever spoke to."

"Has he a good income?" inquired Hester.

"A very good one. He has succeeded to an excellent practice in Middlebury. Taking it altogether, Hester, it is a very desirable match for Mary. If—— There he comes."

Hester looked from the window, and saw a tall, gentlemanly young man coming down the opposite road.

Phœbe opened the door, and Dr. Goring (we may as well call him so as the Middlebury people) entered—a tall, slender young man, exceedingly good looking, with a sunny countenance and a remarkably pleasant voice and manner. Hester did not wonder at Mary's having fallen in love with him; she was ready to do so herself. He wanted the marriage to take place without delay.

"That cannot be," said Hester. "Her mother has only been dead six months."

"But just consider," argued Dr. Goring, laughing and looking as if he did not believe that to be an insuperable objection. "Some of my patients object to me because I am a bachelor. I assure you, Miss Halliwell, it is essential to my professional interests that I should marry soon."

"We so loved our dear mother: all Seaford so respected her. No, Dr. Goring; decidedly no. The very day after the first year's mourning shall be up, then you may have Mary. I scarcely think she would herself wish it to take place earlier."

"But I do," he said.

"Do not urge it, Dr. Goring. Indeed, I cannot consent. I feel that it would not be right or seemly."

So Dr. Goring and Mr. Halliwell went back to Middlebury, and the wedding was settled to take place in June. Mary, of course, remained at home, busy enough with her preparations. Dr. Goring paid them a flying visit now and then, and the time drew near.

What was their astonishment, a few days previous to it, to see Aunt Copp arriving! Hester had incautiously written her word of the progress of affairs, and instead of receiving an answer, wishing Mary good fortune, or something of that sort, who should come but Aunt Copp herself by the morning mail, to be followed in the course of the day by a sea-chest, two hair-trunks and two band-boxes, the mail having refused to carry them. Hester and Lucy were petrified.

"Now, what do you three girls think of yourselves?" she began. "Did you ever hear of a young girl being married from a house without a matron in it to countenance her?"

The idea had certainly not occurred to Hester. Steady

and sedate, and turned thirty years of age, she believed herself a proper guide and protector to Mary, and ventured to hint as much to her aunt.

"Quite false notions," called out Aunt Copp. "Never was such a thing heard of, I tell you, as a young girl going out of a house where there was no married woman in it. For my part, I question if such a wedding would stand good. Why, you would have been the talk for miles round And Mary is such a child, too."

"I am twenty, Aunt Copp," bridled Mary.

"Twenty!" scornfully ejaculated Aunt Copp. "So was I twenty when I married my poor dead-and-gone sailor husband, and a precious goose he found me. I was one-and-twenty when my darling boy was born (I had a letter from him last week, girls, and he's made first officer now, through the other one going off with yellow fever; and was beating about in a calm in the Pacific, which gave him time to write), and a precious goose of a mother *he* found me, the innocent baby! So don't boast to me of your twenty years; go and tell it to the marines. What should three girls know about the management necessary at a wedding? Have you thought to order the cake?"

"Oh yes, we have done that."

"And to get cards printed?"

"And that also."

"And the style of setting out the breakfast? Have you discussed that?"

"Not yet."

"I thought so," groaned Aunt Copp. "No ship-shape arrangements beforehand, no consultations, no nothing. A pretty muddle you'll be in when the morning comes! leaving the arranging of the table to Phœbe, or some such carelessness. Of all incapable head-pieces, that woman's is the worst. Oh, if the poor Major could only look up

from his grave and witness this state of things! or your dear mamma! Of course you'll have a handsome breakfast, Hester?"

"If you think it necessary, Aunt Copp," said Hester; "but we wish to avoid any unnecessary show or expense. Besides the clergyman and his wife, and two or three more friends, there will only be ourselves and Alfred."

"Why, you have never sent for Alfred!" snapped Aunt Copp. It was not that she was really ill-tempered, but her sharp way of snapping people up had grown upon her more than ever.

"Alfred is to marry me, Aunt Copp," said Mary.

"And pray, Miss Lucy, is there anything of the sort in view for you?" Aunt Copp went on.

"Why, Aunt Copp!" ejaculated Lucy, laughing and blushing. "Of course not."

"I don't see any 'of course' in the matter. If Hester is fated to live and die an old maid, that's no reason why you should be. I advise you to look round for a suitable husband. If you have not Mary's beauty, you are a likely looking, lady-like girl, and you'll never see seven-and-twenty again. Keep your weather-eye open, and—— Dear me! the very thing!"

This concluding exclamation, in a changed tone of voice, as though Aunt Copp had just recollected something, caused them to look at her.

"I wish to goodness I knew where he was bound for! But, you see, when I got out, he went on in the mail."

"What is it you are talking about, Aunt Copp?"

"Such a charming gentleman! He was my fellow-passenger. Where he came from I cannot tell you, for he was in the mail when I got in. I should think, by his conversation, he was a Londoner, and had been down to our part of the country. As fine a man as you'd wish to see, six foot high,

with a full blue eye, and a colour like a red cabbage. He told me he was looking out for a wife, and had come out travelling to find one, and meant to marry as soon as he had done so. It would be the very thing for Lucy! I declare, if he were within reasonable distance, I'd send my card, and ask him to tea. I know I should get him for you, Lucy."

"Really, Aunt Copp, you are growing old and ridiculous," responded Lucy, uncertain whether to laugh or be angry.

"Old, am I! ridiculous, am I!" bridled Aunt Copp, in a fury; "everybody doesn't think so. Why, he wanted to try it on me, I could see he did, a handsome man like him, and not a day more than five or six and thirty. He did, Miss Lucy, and you need not begin grinning there. We had the mail to ourselves, or as good, for the fat farmer who took up the opposite seat nearly from side to side was snoring all night. Very polite indeed he was, and very respectful; a thorough gentleman in his manners, and would keep on kissing my hand. But I volunteered to tell him I had been married once, which I had found quite enough, and I did not purpose taking another, preferring to remain my own mistress, besides having a dear son, who was chief officer of a splendid two-decker, now becalmed in the Pacific (unless the wind should have got up since), and that I had no love to spare from my boy for the best second husband that could offer. Whereupon my gentleman turned sulky and gathered himself up in his corner. Old, am I? Forty-five's old, is it? Just put that window up, Mary. I feel hot and agitated."

So they had to endure Aunt Copp's company, and make the best of it. But even before Mary's wedding morning arrived, and her handsome young husband came and took her away, she had tried their patience severely.

CHAPTER XII.

CAPTAIN KERLETON.

VERY dull they felt the day after the wedding, Friday. Aunt Copp was setting things to rights in the house and worrying Phœbe in the kitchen, while Hester and Lucy seemed scarcely to know what to do with themselves. Their brother had left them early in the morning, wishing to get home before Saturday. After dinner, Lucy proposed a walk, and Aunt Copp acquiesced.

"Let us go and look at the haymaking," she said. "The smell of it, coming in here at the windows, puts me in mind of my young days, when I tumbled over the haycocks with the best of them."

Accordingly, they went into the hayfield, one rented by Mr. Williams, the rector. He was there with his wife and little boys, at work in his shirt-sleeves. "That's right, young ladies," he called out, when he saw them, "come and scatter the hay: the more it's open to the sun the better, this hot afternoon. A pleasant rural scene this, ma'am"—to Aunt Copp.

"Yes, sir. I was telling the girls that the smell made me believe myself young again. I have not been much in the way of it, Mr. Williams, since I settled in life; what with living in seaport towns, where one's nose meets nothing but tar and pitch, and going voyages with my husband,

where one scents nothing but salt brine, and never sees a field for months at a time. There, Hester!"

Aunt Copp, with her strong arms, had seized a whole haycock, and dashed it over Hester. That was the commencement of the sport. They laughed, and screamed, and smothered each other in hay, Mrs. Williams and Lucy being foremost in the fray.

After two hours' fun, they were leaving the field, tired, heated and thirsty, when Aunt Copp, who had rushed up to a haycock, some few of which were left intact near the entrance, intending to favour Hester and Lucy with a parting salute from behind, gave a loud scream, which caused them to look round.

Well done, Aunt Copp! Instead of securing the mound of hay, her arms had entangled themselves round the neck of a gentleman, who had stretched himself to recline on its off-side and had fallen into a doze.

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Aunt Copp. "I beg your pardon, sir. I thought I was laying hold of nothing but the haycock."

"No offence, ma'am. I wish you'd put your arms there again. Ah, my dear regretted fellow-traveller, is it you? How *do* you find yourself by this time? I have been up and down the country ever since. I forgot, you must know, the name of the place where you stopped, so I thought I'd take all the stopping-places of the mail, one by one, which I did, and came here in rotation this afternoon, intending to pay my respects to you. What two delightful ladies!"

"They are my nieces," returned Aunt Copp. "Miss Halliwell and Miss Lucy Halliwell."

"And I am Captain Kerleton—if you will allow me to introduce myself—formerly serving with my regiment in India; but the duty did not agree with me, so I sold out.

Would this little spot be a pleasant part of the country to stay in for a week or two, think you?"

"Very," cried Aunt Copp, impressively. "And the Seaford Arms is an excellent inn."

"Then I'm off for it. Which is the way?"

"There," she replied, pointing in the direction of the village, "about five minutes' walk. But won't you come in with us, and take a cup of tea? It will refresh you this hot afternoon. Our house is close by. Girls," she added, seizing a minute to whisper to them as they walked on, for the stranger eagerly accepted the invitation, "this is the gentleman I told you about, the one in the mail, you know, who wants a wife. So look out, Lucy."

Lucy felt annoyed, and naturally. She was a most retiring girl, and had a genuine horror of thrusting herself forward to attract the notice of gentlemen. Hester was even more displeased. She thought it exceedingly wrong of her aunt to introduce a stranger to their home in that unceremonious manner. What did she know of Captain Kerleton? He might be an adventurer, a swindler, for all she could tell to the contrary. As it afterwards turned out, he *was* a gentleman, of good family and fortune, but that was no thanks to Aunt Copp's prudence. The fact was, Mrs. Copp had been connected with seafaring people so long that she had imbibed a touch of their free-and-easy notions, and had become almost as open-hearted in her manners as her late husband, the merchant-captain.

Captain Kerleton took up his residence at the Seaford Arms, and a gay time of it ensued. The whole neighbourhood undertook to patronize him, especially the houses which contained grown-up daughters, for his fortune, really a good one, report considerably magnified. Picnic parties, evening parties, hay-making parties, followed close upon each other, some of which owned Aunt Copp for their projector; none

remembered the quiet village ever to have been so gay. Captain Kerleton did his utmost to render himself agreeable : would run his head off to fetch and carry at any lady's whim, dance himself lame and sing himself hoarse ; and when once he *was* set dancing and singing there was no stopping him. On the whole, Hester liked his manners, and the Seaford Arms gave a pleasant account of his quiet, gentlemanly habits ; but there was one trick of his which was a strange one—that of *staring*. He would sometimes be seized with one of these staring fits, and then he would sit in his chair and look some one straight in the face for a quarter of an hour together, and never once move his eyes. Sometimes it would be Aunt Copp, sometimes Hester, sometimes Lucy, and sometimes others ; it seemed to be all the same to the Captain. Once it was Phœbe. He had ventured into the kitchen to ask her to brush his coat, which had accidentally acquired some dust, and there he sat himself down and stared at Phœbe, until the girl grew so confused that she sidled out of the kitchen and left him to it, bolting herself into the scullery.

One morning they were seated at the open window of their drawing-room, busy over some shirts and bands for Alfred (whose poor wife had enough to do with her children and her household cares without thinking of new shirts and bands for the parson), and were conversing, sadly enough, of their future prospects, which were anything but distinct, when some scarlet object came looming up the opposite road. Lucy saw it first, and they all looked up through the closed Venetian blinds. The sun shone on it, hot and bright, and the scarlet was intermingled with something that glistened like gold, and dazzled the sight.

"Goodness heart alive!" uttered Aunt Copp, after a puzzled gaze through her spectacles, "if it is not Captain Kerleton in uniform!"

They had never seen the Captain in uniform, and a very imposing sight it proved. He detected them at the window, and walked straight up to it.

"Good morning, ladies," he said, putting his face close to the blind. "Is not this a blazing day?"

"Something else looks blazing, I think, Captain," cried Aunt Copp. "We did not know you."

"You mean me in my uniform," returned the Captain; "it came down last night. I should have had it before, but the servants at home made a mistake, and sent my brother's. He is in Scotland—gone to look after his property—or it would not have happened. I thought you'd like to see me in it, so put it on. What are you working at so attentively, Miss Lucy?"

"I am stitching a wristband, Captain Kerleton."

"Not for me, Miss Lucy?"

"No," laughed Lucy. "For my brother."

"Perhaps the time may come, Miss Lucy, when you will stitch mine."

Aunt Copp gave a significant cough, and Lucy, after a surprised glance upwards, blushed deeply, and went on with her stitching.

"Will you walk in, Captain?" said Mrs. Copp. "You will find the front door open."

"Not this morning," replied the Captain. "I only came to bring this—if you'll please open the blind."

Aunt Copp drew the half of the Venetian blind, and the Captain thrust in a small parcel, tied up in white paper, turning short away as soon as she had it in her hands. There was no direction, and Aunt Copp held it in uncertainty.

"Captain Kerleton," she called after him, "what's this for? Is it to be opened?"

"Opened? of course!" answered the Captain, whirling

his head round, his legs striding away the while. "I did not bring it for anything else."

What should be in this parcel but a green and gold book, and a small, beautifully enamelled watch, in a case. They opened the book, full of curiosity. "Advice to Young Ladies about to Enter into Housekeeping. By a Clergyman's Wife." And on the fly-leaf was written, "For the future Mrs. Kerleton, with respectful regards." On the paper enclosing the watch was written, "Miss Lucy."

"Well, if ever I saw such a start as this!" uttered Aunt Copp, whilst Lucy's face turned an indignant red.

"It is shameful, Aunt Copp! It is quite indecent of you! You have been saying something to him about me. I am sure of it!"

"I declare to goodness I have not!" fired Aunt Copp. "This offer of marriage—for it's nothing less—has come of his own free will, and from no talking of mine. Shan't we have a nice time of it, getting her wedding things ready, Hester?"

"Aunt Copp, I always thought you were an idiot, and now I know it," retorted Lucy, struggling between tears and rage. "Offer of marriage, indeed! If it *is* an offer of marriage, you may take it to yourself. Hester, just pack the watch back again to the Seaford Arms; send Phœbe with it. My name was not on the book, so Aunt Copp can do as she chooses with that—keep it for herself, and tell him so."

Lucy's tirade was cut short, for the blind was again pushed partly open, and a scarlet wrist came in.

"I beg your pardon," cried the Captain's voice, "I forgot this."

Aunt Copp involuntarily stretched forth her hand, and received another packet, similar to the one which had contained the watch, the Captain darting off as before at the military pace of a forced march.

"'Miss Lucy Halliwell,'" read Mrs. Copp again, through her spectacles.

"I won't have it! call him back! throw it after him!" exclaimed Lucy.

But Aunt Copp told her she knew better what she was about, and opened it.

A pretty gold chain and a watch-key.

"Well, my dear," said Aunt Copp, "you are in luck."

"Luck!" ironically uttered Lucy. "The man's a fool."

"I know who is a greater," rejoined Mrs. Copp, laughing at Lucy.

"Hester, I appeal to you. Is it right—is it in accordance with good breeding, his thrusting these things in at the window? Ought they not to be sent back instantly?"

"I think it is in accordance with good nature," Hester gently replied, "and to forward them back, as you suggest, would be returning insult for kindness. When he next calls, let Aunt Copp return him the presents, and civilly inform him that you cannot accept them."

"I wish you may get me to do it," cried Mrs. Copp. "'There is a tide in the affairs of man,' and Lucy has now got hers."

So the task fell to Hester. And when the Captain called that afternoon (still in uniform) Hester went to him alone. But before she had well entered upon the subject, Captain Kerleton interrupted her, and made Lucy a very handsome offer of marriage. Hester was nonplussed, not knowing, now the affair was placed upon a regular footing, whether Lucy would have him or not. She retired to the next room.

"Have him? of course," cried Aunt Copp.

"Have him? of course not," repeated Lucy.

"Niece Lucy, the matter is serious now, and you must not be childish over it. What is your objection?"

"I don't know enough of him," said Lucy. "Consider, Aunt Copp; it is only a fortnight since we first set eyes on him. The idea of promising to marry a man after a fortnight's acquaintance!"

"You need not marry him off-hand—or promise to do so," argued Aunt Copp. "You can tell him you wish to see a little more of him before deciding; that will be neither accepting nor rejecting, and give you both time to improve your acquaintance with each other. *I'll* manage it."

Before they could prevent her, she dashed out of the room and joined the Captain, whom they had heard whistling as he leaned from the window. What she said to him neither Hester nor Lucy knew, but she reappeared with the Captain in her wake, and the latter fell on his regimental knees, in the most ridiculous manner, and began kissing Lucy's hand.

When they could get him off his knees and his heroics, Hester and Mrs. Copp strove to convince him how the case stood: that he was not to look upon Lucy as engaged to him, but that she was willing to meet him as an acquaintance, till they had seen more of each other. Oh yes, yes! he agreed to everything, too glad to do it, except to taking back the presents. He grew excited when it was named, and said they would never mention it again, unless they wished to cut him to the throat. Whether he unintentionally substituted that word for heart, or whether he really contemplated making an illegitimate use of his razors, in case his presents were rejected, they did not comprehend. "Never mind the presents, Lucy," cried Aunt Copp; "don't offend him; it will be time enough to send them back if you finally reject him."

So Captain Kerleton stayed on at the Seaford Arms, and Aunt Copp stayed on with her nieces, for she argued that to

leave Lucy at so critical a period would not be "ship-shape." It came to be rumoured in the village that the Captain and Lucy were engaged, and some congratulated her, in spite of her denial, and some were envious. The Captain had bought favour on all sides. When any one gave a party, there would appear dishes of the choicest fruit, the offering of the Captain, and baskets of fish were perpetually arriving everywhere with the Captain's card; he kept the younger ladies in gloves and bouquets, and once, when a concert was to be given in the village for the benefit of the poor music-master, the Captain bought up all the tickets, and treated everybody. Twice he scattered silver by the handful amongst the field labourers, and the village was in an uproar for days afterwards, to the wrath of the farmers and the edification of the beershops. Nothing came amiss to the Captain's purse; whatever he saw, he bought up and distributed, from parcels of new books to litters of sucking-pigs. As to Lucy Halliwell, the things that arrived for her were just as incongruous. One morning there was a knock at the door, and upon Phœbe's answering it, a fan was delivered to her; an hour afterwards there was another knock, and this proved to be the milliner's girl, bearing a lace handkerchief. Aunt Copp thought these attentions were charming, or professed to do so; and the things were put by with the rest of the presents. As to remonstrating with Captain Kerleton, they had given that over as hopeless, and had no resource but to take the things in. Many of them came from London, without any address to send them back to, and they did not choose to raise a scandal by despatching them to the Captain's apartments at the inn.

But things could not go on like that for ever, and Lucy felt that she must accept or reject him. The Captain felt so too, and he went up one day and told Lucy, in the

presence of her sister and aunt, that he had been lying on tenter-hooks all night, and for several previous nights besides, and *would* she marry him?

"I'll make her so happy," said he, appealing to Aunt Copp, as Lucy glided from the room; "she shall have what she likes and go where she likes. Would she like to see China?"

Mrs. Copp thought not. It was too far. She had once herself been in the Chinese seas, and was glad in her heart to get into British ones again.

"Oh! Because distance is no object with me," explained the Captain.

"I think, Captain Kerleton, that Lucy would wish to see a little of your family," suggested Hester.

"There's not a soul left of it but me and my brother," answered the Captain. "When he comes back from Scotland, I'll take Lucy up to see him, if she likes; which would be a good opportunity for her to get anything in London she may want for the wedding."

He evidently spoke in no bad faith; Hester saw he did not. But he did make simple remarks now and then, such as one might expect to hear from a child.

"That's not the fashion in our part of the country," said Aunt Copp, snapping him up. "Young ladies don't go on journeys with gentlemen before they are married to them."

"But that is exactly what I want," returned the Captain. "I have been ready to marry her all along. It was Miss Lucy who would not. Will she marry me to-morrow?"

"Goodness, Captain!" remonstrated Aunt Copp. "With no house, and no establishment, and no anything? The neighbours would think us all out of our senses together!"

"Well, the long and the short of it is this: if Miss Lucy will not have me, I shall go and find somebody else who

will," cried the Captain, turning sulky—an occasional failing of his. "And I'll go off by the mail to-night, if she does not give me an answer to-day."

Lucy gave him his answer, and accepted him. "But, Hester," she said to her sister, "I do it chiefly to oblige him and Aunt Copp; I don't much care for him." And Hester's opinion was that Lucy spoke the truth.

"I am not madly in love, you know," she went on, laughing, "as you were with somebody, once upon a time. I do not fancy it is in my constitution, or else our friend the Captain has failed to call it forth."

It was decided that before fixing on any place for a residence Captain Kerleton and Lucy should travel a little, after their marriage, taking Paris first. The Captain was perfectly agreeable to anything: would stop in the neighbourhood of Seaford, or live in London, or be a fixture in Paris, or voyage over to China. Everything that Lucy or Mrs. Copp suggested he fell in with. He seemed to think more about personal trifles. "Would you like me to go through the ceremony in my uniform, Miss Lucy, or in plain clothes?" he inquired. "Such—let us say—as a blue coat, white waistcoat, and black—these things," slapping his knee. "What is your advice?"

It was a very home question, especially before witnesses, and Lucy blushed excessively. "Perhaps Aunt Copp can tell," she stammered.

"Oh, as to those trifles, it's not of the slightest consequence," irreverently answered Aunt Copp. "When you two have once got your wedding over, you will know what nonsense it was to have made any fuss about it—as we old married stagers can tell you. Captain, of course you will have your brother down to be groomsman?"

"No, I won't," replied the Captain, bluntly. "He is the most interfering fellow going, always meddling and

thwarting. You don't know the scrapes he has got me into through his interference."

"But your own elder brother, Captain Kerleton," urged Aunt Copp. "It would be so very undutiful."

"Shouldn't care if he was my own mother," doggedly retorted the Captain. "He is not coming down to my wedding."

But Aunt Copp was of a different opinion. And what should she do, unknown to any one, but despatch the following note to Major Kerleton, the Captain's brother, at his town house :—

"Dear Sir,

"As we are soon to be near connections, I make no apology for addressing you. Captain Kerleton being about to marry my niece, Miss Lucy Halliwell, I think it only seemly and right that you, as the Captain's elder brother and nearest relative, should be present to give your support and countenance to the ceremony. It will not take place for three weeks or a month, and we are only now beginning the preparations ; but I write thus early to give an opportunity of my letter being forwarded to you in Scotland, where we hear you are staying. If you oblige me with a line in reply, stating that you accord us the favour of your company, I will write again and let you know when the day is fixed.

"Remaining, dear sir,

"Your obedient servant,

"Rebecca Copp.

"Major Kerleton."

And Mrs. Copp hugged herself in secret over what she had done, and told nobody.

CHAPTER XIII.

LUCY'S ADVENTURE.

MEANWHILE they began to be actively engaged, getting ready for Lucy's wedding. One morning they were in the midst of work, Miss Bowen, the dressmaker, having gone to them for the day, when they saw Captain Kerleton approaching the house. Lucy told Phœbe to say they were engaged, but would see him in the afternoon. But the Captain sent word up he had something very particular to communicate to Miss Lucy ; so she had to go to him.

The Captain wanted her to go for a walk, with, of course, Hester or Aunt Copp, for she was not in the habit of walking out alone with him. And this was the "particular communication" he had to make.

"It is out of my power this morning," Lucy replied. "We have some work about which we cannot put aside."

"Leave them to do it," advised the Captain ; "you come for a walk. Come by yourself : never mind what that old Aunt Copp says."

"They cannot do without me," explained Lucy. "The dressmaker is cutting out my morning dresses, and I must be there that she may try them on."

"Put it off till to-morrow," urged the Captain. "Work can be done one day as well as another. See what a splendid morning it is."

"Miss Bowen will not be here to-morrow," answered Lucy. "Indeed I cannot leave them now."

"But I want you to come," persisted Captain Kerleton, somewhat after the fractious manner of a spoiled child. "You must come. You'll never go and set up your rubbishing work in opposition to my wishes, Miss Lucy?"

"Do not put it in that light," said Lucy, gently. "My dresses must be tried on, or they cannot be made; and if I went out they would all be at a standstill. I shall be most happy to go with you later in the day."

"Then you will not grant me this simple favour?"

"I cannot," returned Lucy; and away rushed the Captain, dashing to the front door and stamping across the road.

In the evening he arrived again. They were at tea, taking it in the workroom for convenience' sake, when Phœbe entered and said the Captain wanted to speak to Miss Hester. "Not Miss Lucy," Phœbe repeated, "Miss Hester." Hester went downstairs. Captain Kerleton was sitting in the easy-chair, looking red and excited.

"Do you know how she behaved to me this morning?" he began, without preface or ceremony.

"Who?" asked Hester.

"She. Miss Lucy. I asked her, as the greatest favour, to go for a little walk with me, and she told me to my face that she would not."

"She really could not, Captain Kerleton," said Hester. "I have no doubt she would have liked to do so. You must not fancy she acted from caprice: Lucy is not capable of it."

"She told me there was some trashy sewing going on, and she had to stay in for it."

"It was the case."

"Well," returned the Captain, speaking in the dogged, obstinate manner which now and then came over him. "I

look upon it in this light. When a young lady, who has promised to be your wife, makes an excuse that she can't go out with you, it is equivalent to saying she wants to break matters off. That is how I have taken it."

"Break—what?" uttered Hester, staring at the Captain, and feeling as if she were turning into a cold perspiration.

"Why, I conclude that Miss Lucy wished to make known, in a roundabout way, that she was tired of me. And I have acted upon it."

"Dear Captain Kerleton, you are entirely mistaken," said Hester. "I can assure you Lucy is perfectly true to you. The work she had to remain in for was in preparation for her marriage."

"It's too late now," said the Captain, with redoubled obstinacy, "for I think I know somebody who would suit me better."

Hester sat opposite to him, glued to her chair, unable to utter a word, and wondering whether he had taken leave of his senses. He, however, was not glued to his, for he suddenly rose from it, and dropped down on his knees close to Hester.

"My dear Miss Hester, it's you and nobody else. I do think you the most charming, amiable creature on earth; and I have transferred my affections from Miss Lucy to you. Will you have me?"

Hester was never so taken back in her life, and a suspicion did cross her, in earnest, that Lucy's refusal in the morning must have put the Captain's brains to flight. He took forcible possession of her hands, and would neither get up nor let her do so. While they were in this ridiculous position, who should come bustling into the room, with the sugar-basin, but Aunt Copp.

"Why, what on earth—Hester! what's the matter?"

The Captain took a move sideways on his knees, and

addressed himself to Aunt Copp, which afforded an opportunity to Hester of rising.

"Miss Lucy has cut me, ma'am. That is, she acted—purposely—so as to make me cut her; and my affections are now fixed on Miss Hester. I was on the point of praying her to name her own day for our union, when you interrupted us."

"Good patience deliver us!" ejaculated Aunt Copp, her mouth opening with astonishment, and remaining so. "What is all this?"

Hester could not speak for laughing then, the whole thing struck her as so supremely absurd. There knelt Captain Kerleton, in the everlasting uniform, his hands thrown theatrically out towards Mrs. Copp, and his face twisted into a die-away expression towards Hester, while Aunt Copp stood arrested in the middle of the room, one hand grasping the sugar-basin, the other the silver tongs, her face turning to petrifaction, and her eyes rolling from one to the other in a sort of horror.

"Niece Hester, what *is* this? I insist upon knowing."

"I think Captain Kerleton meant to play off a little joke with me, Aunt Copp," she answered. "Lucy, it seems, offended him this morning; but they will make it all right again."

"But, by Heaven, it is no joke, Miss Hester," interrupted the Captain, springing up. "I mean it as real earnest."

"Then allow me to assure you, Captain Kerleton, that I shall never treat it but as a joke, now and always," Hester impressively whispered. "And pray let neither of us recur to it again, even in thought."

"Then you won't have me? You mean to insinuate that?" he reiterated aloud, pulling a face as long as his arm.

"I would not have you, Captain Kerleton, if you were

worth your weight in gold," she said. "So let the joke pass away, and we had better say nothing about it to Lucy."

"Highty-tighty," cried Aunt Copp, recovering from her petrifaction and going forward; "but you can't do these things, Captain. Shake off one sister and take up another! I see what it is: you have been getting up your temper because Lucy crossed your whim this morning. So now you must get it down again. We were just going out to take a walk, and the best thing you can do is to go with us. Why, you would be as bad as a sailor."

"A sailor?" sullenly repeated the Captain.

"Yes, sir, a sailor. They have sweethearts by the dozen in each port, and that's well known. Many's the wrangle I have had with my boy about that: he vowing, by all that's blue, that *he* had not, and I knowing he had. Don't tell me. But you can't have two in a house, Captain. So sit down there and get cool while we put our things on."

He went out with Aunt Copp and Lucy. Hester remained at home, truly uncomfortable, and deliberating whether she ought not to tell Lucy what had taken place. For if the thing were not a joke—as she kept trying to persuade herself, though the more she tried, the more incomprehensible a joke it grew—was a man capable of these violent changes and fits of temper one to whom they ought to entrust Lucy?

The following day dawned, and they all rose as usual, little thinking what it was to bring forth. For how many a one has a day risen in happiness to close in sorrow, dark as the darkest night! It was not strictly sorrow, however, that came to them; rather mortification. Lucy went out to spend the day with some friends, who had invited her for a farewell visit previous to her marriage; and as Hester and Aunt Copp were seated at work, after dinner, the latter spoke.

"Well, I think I must have made a kaleidoscope of my spectacles, for he is ever changing; now it is he, now it is not! Hester, *is* that the Captain, or is it not?"

Hester followed the direction of her aunt's eyes, which were fixed on a gentleman who was advancing up the road in face of them. "Yes—no—yes," was her contradictory reply. "I declare, Aunt Copp, I am not sure. One minute it looks like him, and the next it does not. If it is the Captain, he has discarded his uniform."

It was not Captain Kerleton, but one who bore a striking resemblance to him.

"I know!" exclaimed Aunt Copp, with awakened interest. "It is his brother. I wrote for him."

"You, Aunt Copp?"

"Yes, to come to the wedding. But I told him to wait for a second letter. He has come too soon."

Phœbe brought in a card, "Major Kerleton," and ushered in the Major after it, a pleasant, cordial man. He proceeded to explain his business, and poor Aunt Copp was ready to sink through her chair with vexation, for it was she who had been the means of introducing the Captain to Seaford, and—worse still—to Lucy.

All that they had observed as strange in his conduct was now accounted for. *Captain Kerleton was a lunatic.* Some years previously, when in India, he had met with an accident which caused concussion of the brain, and he had never entirely recovered his intellect. At that time the Captain was on the point of marriage with a young lady to whom he was much attached, but the match was then broken off, and this seemed to have left some impression on his mind which it could not get rid of. He came home, and had since lived with his brother, and years had wrought so much improvement in him that he would pass muster in society without suspicion, as he had done at Seaford:

the only point on which his intellects were still wrong was a propensity for making offers of marriage. "I have had no end of trouble with him on this score," said the Major, "for if he has made a fool of one lady in the last eight years, he has of fifty. Of course, when I am on the spot, I whisper a word, and matters are soon rectified; but once or twice, when he has taken advantage of my absence from home to start off, as he did this time, there has been more trouble to get them straight. It is five years ago this summer," continued the Major, lowering his voice, "that he found his way into Yorkshire. I was taken ill—seriously ill—on my journey, and was absent longer than I had ever been. By George! when I came back, and proceeded to hunt up Richard, I found him a married man."

"A married man!" uttered Mrs. Copp.

"He had gammoned some young lady into marrying him: a very nice sort of girl she was, too; of respectable family. But they were poor, thought they had a catch in Dick, and hurried on the match."

"Mercy on us!" breathed Aunt Copp. "Is she living?"

"To be sure she is. She——"

"Why, then, the Captain is a married man now!" she screamed, unceremoniously interrupting Major Kerleton.

"Neither more nor less," returned the Major. "When his young wife, poor thing, found out Dick's infirmity, she refused to remain with him—and quite right of her, too, I think. She has lived since then on the Continent with a married sister; Dick—or, at least, I, for him—allowing her a yearly income."

"But what a wicked man he must be to attempt to marry my niece when he has a wife living!" remonstrated Aunt Copp.

"Not wicked," interposed the Major. "Upon this point Richard is *insane;* the doctors say incurably so. He would

marry twenty wives if he could get the opportunity to do so, and never know that he was doing wrong."

"A regular Bluebeard! He ought to be tried for bigamy," groaned Aunt Copp. "But it has been a blessed escape for Lucy."

"It has indeed. Not but that I am sincerely grieved he should ever have been brought into contact with your niece, for this *exposé* cannot be a pleasant one for her. He left home, it seems, the very day I did, and must have lost no time."

"He ought to be confined," said Mrs. Copp.

"He is so sane on other points, that to confine him would be scarcely justifiable," returned the Major. "But I shall learn a lesson by this last vagary, and shall place a watch over him, if I have to leave home again."

"Sane on other points!" repeated Aunt Copp; "I don't know about that. He seems to have unlimited command of money."

"Not unlimited. His fortune is a large one, and he has command over a portion of it."

"Perhaps you'll walk this way, sir," said Mrs. Copp, rising, and leading the way upstairs to a spare bedroom. Hester followed. "There!" she said, exhibiting the curious lot of presents Lucy had received, "perhaps you can tell me what is to be done with all these, Major Kerleton? The Captain sent them here, and we could not stop him."

Major Kerleton laughed heartily. "Poor Dick!" he said, "this is another of his tricks. He gives away all before him."

"He has supplied the parish here," was Aunt Copp's rejoinder. "What is to be done with these?"

"Whatever you please. If there are any worth keeping, pray retain them. The rest dispose of any way—throw them away if they are no better worth."

"Several of the articles are of value. The watch and chain especially, and some rings. But, sir," and Mrs. Copp drew herself up to her full height, "my niece will not allow her to keep them, or anything else."

"I hope and trust she will," warmly returned the Major. "I shall pray Miss Lucy to accept them *from me*. Ah, my dear ladies," he continued, taking the hand of each, "I only wish it were in my power to make any reparation to her for the annoyance which my unfortunate brother has brought on her and you. Pecuniary compensation is out of the question, but——"

"Sir!" interrupted Aunt Copp, in an awful voice, "do you know that you are addressing persons of your own standing in life?—the sister and daughter of one who was of your own rank, the Major Halliwell. He traces his descent to nobility, and not far distant. In George the Third's time——"

"My dear lady, you are mistaking me. I was about to say that the only compensation possible is the sincere expression of my heartfelt and genuine sympathy; it is not in my power to offer any other."

"Not any," responded Aunt Copp, with stony rigidity. "The sooner such a lunatic as he is out of Seaford the better for all parties."

So thought Major Kerleton; and he started that same day with the poor madman for London.

Of course the event to Lucy Halliwell could not be otherwise than deeply mortifying, but her heart had never been engaged in it, and she soon grew to laugh at it heartily. They took to calling it "Lucy's Adventure," for it was the only romantic incident that ever happened to Lucy.

What was now to be the career of Hester and Lucy

Halliwell? The year in their home at Seaford had expired; they had their £500 each, and must look out for some means of earning a livelihood. It is certain that young women in a gentle sphere of life, when left unprovided for by the death of parents, require more sympathy than any other class. It may be that they have a little money; it is to be hoped that daughters so left generally have. This they proceed to embark in various ways, according to their capacities and the ideas they have imbibed from their station in society. But let the reader be very sure that there are few of these unprotected women but have to bear a crushing weight of struggle and sorrow. Anxious perplexity, pinching want, heart-breaking care—these are often theirs; and for many there is no turn, no worldly rest, until they find it in the grave.

Aunt Copp, who remained with them to wind up affairs at Seaford, proposed several things. One was that Lucy should go out as governess, for which she was so well qualified, and that Hester should have a home with her in Liverpool, which she would be proud and happy to give her, she observed, and turn over to her all the sewing and pudding-making. But they decided, themselves, upon establishing a ladies' boarding-school. It appeared more congenial to them than anything else, and they both felt that they had the qualifications and will to do their full duty by the children who might be entrusted to their care: Hester in contributing to their comforts, and teaching them, as she phrased it, sewing and embroidery, grammar and spelling; Lucy in giving them her own higher standard of education and accomplishments.

Where was it to be? They decided upon the neighbourhood of London, and departed for the great city; but they had much trouble settling themselves. Some of the suburbs they found overstocked with schools, some were not

considered quite healthy, some had no suitable house that they could rent. They did settle themselves at last, after spending a mint of money, as they said, in whirling omnibuses. The precise locality need not be named, but it is well-known. They took a capital house, large and convenient, enclosed from the high-road by a wall, with a pretty garden in front, and a large playground behind. They paid eighty pounds a year for it, besides taxes—a rent that alarmed them. Quarter-day never drew near for many years but it brought to them a heart-sickening fear. The next step was to furnish the house. The furniture from their old home was the worse for wear, and though it had filled a small house, it was lost in a large one. So they bought new things for the drawing-room and for the children's bedrooms, with desks and forms for the school-room, disposing the old about the house as they best could, and occasionally, as time went on, buying some almost indispensable article, as they thought they could spare the money.

Of course they had sent out cards and advertised, and then they sat down in their new house and waited for pupils. The first quarter they received some demands for circulars, but nothing came of it; the next they had three day-scholars, two sisters and another. Hester then took her courage in both hands and resolved to call at the principal houses in the neighbourhood, urging her hope of patronage. Whether they liked her appearance she did not know, but soon after they had eleven day-scholars and five boarders. So they thought success was coming to them all at once, and had indistinct visions of retiring with a fortune.

BOOK THE FIFTH.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PHYSICIAN AND HIS WIFE.

SPRING was succeeding to a certain long and sharp winter; but the mornings and evenings were dreary, and the prevalent east wind penetrated to the very warmest house in Wexborough—a fashionable town for invalids, noted all over England for its salubrity. That east wind had struck inflammation to the chest of a lovely child, and was quickly carrying it away. It lay on it mother's knee before the fire. She, the mother, was young and very pretty, but delicate and careworn. Her whole heart was bound up in this child, and she would not believe but that it was recovering.

"Don't you think it looks a little better than it did this morning?" she anxiously asked, raising her eyes to her husband, who had come in and was standing near her.

He made an evasive reply, for he was a physician, and knew that the child was dying. At that moment there was a knock at the front door, and they heard the maid show the visitor into the consulting-room—their only servant, for they were very poor, the physician trying to struggle into practice.

"It's Mr. Fairfax, sir," she said, entering the room.

Now Mr. Fairfax was Dr. Elliot's landlord, and the

physician, for certain reasons, would rather have had a visit from any man, living or dead, than from him. He broke out into an impatient word, and demanded sharply of the girl why she admitted *him*. She was beginning an explanation, but he would not stop to hear it.

"Well, doctor," began Mr. Fairfax, who owned no end of property in Wexborough, "I have not come upon my usual visit, and that I told your girl, for I saw she was preparing the old answer. You know that house of mine in the Crescent, which was to be let furnished?"

"Yes."

"Well, it is let, and the people have arrived to-day. A lady and gentleman and several servants—plenty of money there seems to be there. The gentleman appears in bad health, and they asked me to recommend a physician. So I mentioned you."

"I am very much obliged to you," said Dr. Elliot, with animation.

"Yes, but, doctor, we don't do anything for nothing in this world. I shall expect part of your fees to be handed to me for back rent. Without my recommendation you would never have got in there, for I need not remind you that there are physicians in Wexborough longer established and more popular than you. Out of every guinea you must give me half. Is it a bargain?"

"It is," answered Dr. Elliot. "Honour bright."

"Then put on your hat, and go up at once. They want to see you to-night. Number nine."

Dr. Elliot soon reached the Crescent. His patient was seated in a room alone. One leg, cased in flannel, was raised on a foot-rest. Glasses and dessert were on the table, though more from custom than for use. Dr. Elliot's card had preceded him, and the servant had placed a chair.

"They have brought me here for change of air," he said

to Dr. Elliot, after speaking of his illness; "but I have little faith, myself, in any change being beneficial. Such a complication of disorders! And now comes this attack of gout, worse than any I ever had before. I am a young man to have gout, doctor, but it is hereditary in my family."

"Yes," replied Dr. Elliot. "You have perhaps—excuse me, but I ought to know all your case—been a free liver?"

"Pretty well for that: though not more so than other country gentlemen addicted to field sports; and latterly I have been obliged to be abstemious."

When Dr. Elliot was writing the prescription, it occurred to him that Mr. Fairfax had not mentioned the name, so he asked it now. John Turnberry, he thought was the reply, but his patient was taken with a fit of coughing at the moment. He wrote it "John Turnberry, Esquire." As he was leaving the house, a servant came up and said his mistress wished to see him before he went.

The lady stood in the drawing-room when Dr. Elliot entered, the rays of the chandelier falling upon her. He was struck with amazement at her beauty. A tall, stately woman of eight and twenty, her eyes haughty, her complexion brilliant, her features of exquisite contour.

She began to speak; he began to speak; but neither went on. Both stood, awed to silence, for they had recognized each other, and to neither was the recognition palatable. It was Mrs. Turnbull, not Turnberry, and Dr. Elliot saw in her the sister of his wife, once Clara Freer. *She* saw in him the handsome, harum-scarum young medical student, Tom Elliot, whom she had admired, if not loved, ere he had declared his preference for her sister. That was eight years ago, and no communication had been held between the families since then. Tom Elliot's friends had helped him while he finished his studies, obtained his

diploma, and became Dr. Elliot. Since then, he had set up at Wexborough, and had been living on, he hardly knew how, waiting for practice: his wife would have said, struggling on.

Dr. Elliot held out his hand to Mrs. Turnbull. "May I hope that the lapse of time has softened your feelings towards me?" he said, in low, persuasive tones—and none knew how to speak more persuasively than he. "Now that we have been brought together in this strange way, let me implore a reconciliation—for Louisa's sake."

Mrs. Turnbull, after a moment's hesitation, put her hand into his. "For Louisa's sake," she repeated. "Are you living in Wexborough? Have you a flourishing practice?"

"Not flourishing. Practice comes slowly to beginners."

"How is Louisa? Is she much altered?"

"Very much, I think. The loss of her children has had a great effect upon her."

"Ah! you have children, then?" And the old jealous feeling of bygone days came over Mrs. Turnbull. She had had none.

"Yes, we have been unfortunate in them all, save the eldest. I have left one at home now in Louisa's arms, dying."

Mrs. Turnbull was shocked, and a better feeling returned to her. "I should like to see Louisa," she exclaimed. "Suppose I go now."

"Now!" cried Dr. Elliot, in dismayed tones, as he thought of the inward signs of poverty in his house and its disordered appearance just then. "But we are all at sixes and sevens to-night, with this dying child."

"Oh, I can allow for that: I know what illness is. I have seen enough of it since I married Squire Turnbull. Wait one moment, and I will go with you."

She had possessed a will of her own as Clara Freer, and

she had not parted with it as Mrs. Turnbull. She called for her bonnet and cloak, and then went into the dining-room to her husband. He looked surprised, as well he might, to see her going out in the darkness of evening, in a strange town.

"Did you recognize him?" she said, leaning over her husband's chair.

"Recognize him!" repeated Squire Turnbull, not understanding. "He is a clever man, I think; seems to know what he is about. Young, though. His name is"—running his eyes over the card—"Elliot. 'Dr. Elliot.'"

"He is metamorphosed into 'doctor' now. He was Tom Elliot when he ran away with Louisa."

"By Jingo! it's never that Tom Elliot!" uttered the astonished Squire. "Is *he* Louisa's husband? Well, it did strike me that I had seen his face before."

"He is Louisa's husband, and she is in trouble, he says. A child of theirs is dying—now—to-night—as I understand. I fancy, too, they are in poverty," she added, "which of course was only to be expected, acting as they did. But he asked me to let bygones be bygones, for Louisa's sake, and I am going to see her."

"Bygones! of course let them be bygones," cried the warm-hearted Squire; "why not? I have always blamed your father for holding out about it. It was done, and couldn't be helped; and the only remedy left was to make the best of it. A dying child! poverty! Clara, don't forget that we have abundance of everything, money included. Let your hand be open, wife, if it be needed. Poor Loo!"

She went out, leaving the Squire to his reflections. They carried him back, naturally, to that old time, eight years ago. He had admired Louisa Freer then, and wished to marry her, but Mr. Tom Elliot forestalled him. He had then after some delay transferred his proposals to the elder sister,

and they were accepted. To be mistress of Turnbull Park and four thousand a year, was a position any lawyer's daughter might covet. Clara did so, and gained it.

It was a strange meeting, the two sisters coming together in that unexpected manner, after so many years of estrangement. Oh! the contrast between them! Mrs. Elliot pale, haggard, unhappy, her gown a faded merino, and her hair little cared for: Clara, who had thrown off her mantle, in an evening dress of black velvet, its low body and sleeves trimmed with rich white lace, and gold ornaments and diamonds decorating her neck, her arms and luxuriant hair! More beautiful she was, more beautiful altogether than of yore.

There arose now, from a stool at his mother's feet, a lovely boy of seven years old; tall, healthy, and straight as a dart. He fixed his large brown eyes on the stranger's face; but he was not very well dressed, and Dr. Elliot, muttering something about "William's bedtime," took him out of the room.

"What a noble boy!" involuntarily exclaimed Mrs. Turnbull, gazing after him; "what an intellectual countenance! He is your eldest child, I presume, and this was your youngest."

Was! She unconsciously spoke of the infant in the past tense, for she had noticed its ghastly face and laboured breathing. Very, very fast was its life ebbing now.

"How many children have you?" inquired Mrs. Elliot.

"None." And there was something in the tone of the short answer which told that the subject was a sore one.

"You are well off!" vehemently spoke Mrs. Elliot. "Better never have them than have them only to lose them. William was born within the first year of our marriage, and then for nearly three years I had no more children. I did so wish for a girl—as did my husband.

How I longed for it I cannot tell you. The passionate appeal of Rachel I understood then—'Give me children, or else I die.' Well, a girl was born; but born to die: then another was born; but born to die: now this one, who has stayed longer with me than they, for she is fourteen months old—now this one is about to die! You are well off."

"Is Dr. Elliot a good husband to you?" questioned Mrs. Turnbull.

"He is a kind husband—yes—generally speaking," was the reply of Mrs. Elliot, whilst a vivid blush dyed her pale cheek. "But he is fond of pleasure—not altogether what may be called a domestic husband. And now, Clara, dare I ask you of my father? Two years ago I heard that he was living, and I see you are not in mourning."

"He is well and strong. As full of business as ever."

"Does he ever," hesitated Mrs. Elliot, "speak of forgiving me?"

"He has never mentioned you—never once. He was dreadfully incensed at the step you took. And when offended, it is so hard for him to forgive. You must remember that, Louisa."

"I wrote to him when Willy was born. And again when I lost my first little girl."

"Indeed!" cried Mrs. Turnbull. "He never told me. What was the result?"

"Both times the same. He returned the letters in a blank cover. It is not that I want assistance from him, but I should like forgiveness."

"But some assistance would not be unwelcome, I presume?"

"Oh, we can manage to get along. I suppose it is only right that straitened circumstances should follow such a marriage as ours. If I craved help for anything, it would be for the boy. He is a most intelligent child—as you saw

by his eyes and countenance—can read as well as I can. But it is time his education began in earnest."

"Will you give him to me?" eagerly asked Mrs. Turnbull. "I will adopt him and do by him as if he were my own. I believe that you are shortly in expectation of another infant."

"It is so," answered Mrs. Elliot. "Night and day, since there has been a fear of losing this one, have I prayed it might be a girl."

"Then you can spare me the boy. Talk it over with Dr. Elliot. It is only to lend him, you know, Louisa; and remember, the advantages to him will be great."

Mrs. Elliot did talk over with her husband Mrs. Turnbull's offer, and they were both of opinion that one so desirable should not be refused. Therefore, when Mr. and Mrs. Turnbull departed for Turnbull Park, William Elliot accompanied them. The little girl had died.

The following year they returned to Wexborough. Dr. and Mrs. Elliot were progressing but little better: practice was very slow in coming to him. They hardly knew William: he was wonderfully improved. Dressed in costly habits, accustomed now to luxury, servants, a pony at his command, and his education pressed on, it was indeed an alteration for him. But his sweet disposition had not changed, and he met his parents with a burst of emotion that astonished them. He came every day to see them, but his home was still with Mrs. Turnbull.

Not long had Mr. and Mrs. Turnbull been at Wexborough this second time before a disagreeable feeling which during their former visit had stolen like a shadow over Mrs. Elliot's heart rose again. Like a shadow, indeed, for she would not *allow* herself to notice it then, and with their departure she dismissed it from her thoughts,

never, she sincerely hoped, to recall it. Yet now it was forcing itself upon her with redoubled vigour—the suspicion that her husband admired, not in too brotherly a way, Mrs. Turnbull; that there was too good an understanding between them. Not that Mrs. Elliot feared anything more than flirtation. Whatever opinion she might have formed, or had reason to form, of her husband's laxity of morals during their married life, she was perfectly sure of her sister's principles; but that an undue attachment for each other's society had grown up was very evident. On Mrs. Turnbull's part it was probably nothing beyond gratified vanity; but Louisa had never forgotten how Clara had once confessed to something very like love for Tom Elliot. Louisa had then thought that his love and admiration were given to none but herself; she now knew that at least his admiration was given to every handsome woman who came in his way. Few had he fallen in with so beautiful as Mrs. Turnbull; he was at no pains to conceal his sense of it; and she repulsed not the marked attentions of the very handsome physician. But all this was disagreeable to Mrs. Elliot, and as the weeks of the Turnbulls' second sojourn at Wexborough lengthened into months, and her husband passed more and more of his time with Mrs. Turnbull, it jarred not only on her feelings, but on her temper. Existence seemed to possess for her but two phases: passionate love for her little baby-girl and jealousy for her husband and sister. Never yet had she breathed a word of this unpleasantness to Dr. Elliot, but she was naturally of a hasty spirit, and the explosion was sure to come.

One afternoon, as she stood at her window, holding her babe, she saw her sister and William coming down the street. Then she saw her husband meet them, draw Mrs. Turnbull's arm within his, and lead her in. William came running up to the sitting-room.

"Where is your aunt, Willy?" she said, as she stooped to kiss him.

"She is gone with papa into his consulting-room. Mamma, who do you think is come to Uncle Turnbull's?"

Mrs. Elliot did not answer him: she was listening for any sound from downstairs, jealously tormenting herself with conjectures of what they might be doing—what talking about. Mrs. Turnbull came up shortly.

"I have had the greatest surprise to-day, Louisa," she exclaimed. "Who do you think came by the midday coach?"

Mrs. Elliot answered coldly—that she was not likely to guess.

"Papa."

"Papa!" repeated Mrs. Elliot, aroused from her brooding thoughts.

"Papa. I never was more surprised. We were at luncheon. The servant—it happened to be the new one who was in waiting—said a gentleman wanted to see me, and in walked my father. It seems he was at Wexborough, on business for one of his clients, and being so near to us, came in this morning. But he leaves to-morrow by the early coach, and is now gone to the Royal Arms to secure a room. I could not persuade him to sleep at our house; he said he should disturb us in the morning."

"Did Willy see him?" sighed Mrs. Elliot.

"Yes. But papa took little notice of him: he never does when he sees him at the Park. I am going to leave Willy with you for the afternoon, for his presence always seems a restraint on my father. I wish you would give me a glass of wine, Louisa," added Mrs. Turnbull. "I am thirsty and tired."

Mrs. Elliot laid down her infant, and brought forth a decanter of port. It was the same wine as that in Mrs.

Turnbull's own cellar, Squire Turnbull having sent in a present of some of it to Mrs. Elliot.

"I am thirsty too," said William. "Let me have a glass, mamma."

"Wine for you!" exclaimed Mrs. Elliot; "no, indeed, Willy. When little boys are thirsty, they drink water."

"What nonsense!" interposed Mrs. Turnbull. "Give the child some wine, Louisa. It must be the fish-sauce we had at luncheon, no doubt, that is making us both so thirsty—it was highly seasoned."

A half-dispute ensued, carried on good humouredly by Mrs. Turnbull, with bitterness by her sister. The latter handed William a tumbler of water: Mrs. Turnbull ordered him not to drink it until his mamma put some wine into it, and William Elliot, a sensitive child, stood in discomfort, his cheeks crimson, and whispering that he was not thirsty then. Dr. Elliot came in.

"Did you ever know anything like Louisa's absurdity to-day?" Mrs. Turnbull said to him. "Willy is dying with thirst, and I want to put a little wine into the water, instead of letting him drink it plain; but she won't give him wine."

"He shall not have wine," repeated Mrs. Elliot, with decision. "It is improper for him."

"Nonsense," muttered Dr. Elliot, and pouring some wine into the water, ordered William to drink it. His wife's face and lips turned of a deadly whiteness; with her, the sign of extreme anger. She caught up her babe and left the room.

"I must be going, Louisa," called out Mrs. Turnbull. "My father will have returned from the hotel. Good-bye."

She went downstairs, followed by Dr. Elliot, and Mrs. Elliot saw them walking slowly up the street together. She was boiling over with wrath and indignation.

Willy stole towards her, his little face a picture of sorrow as he timidly strove to utter some words. "Mamma, dearest mamma!" he whispered, bursting into a flood of tears, "I am so sorry I asked for the wine! I did not know you wished me not to have it. I will not ask for any again."

She drew him to her, kissed him passionately, and sobbed with him. But she made no comment to the child.

CHAPTER XV.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

Dr. Elliot did not return to tea ; not, in fact, until it was time to take William home again; and then came the explosion. The physician took it with provoking coolness, began to whistle, and asked whether the boy was ready.

"He never goes back again," said Mrs. Elliot. "His bed is made up at home."

"There is no reason why the lad's interests should suffer because your temper has turned crusty this evening," observed Dr. Elliot. "He shall certainly go back to Squire Turnbull's."

"When a woman can incite a child to disobey his mother, she is no longer fitting to have control over him. Mrs. Turnbull shall have no more control over mine."

"Was it worth while to make a fuss over such a trifle? As though a drop of wine would hurt the boy! Remember the obligations he is under to Mrs. Turnbull."

"Remember your obligations to me, your wife. I have borne much, Thomas, since we married, but I will not be domineered over by you both conjointly, or tamely see your love given to her."

"Tamely!—love!" uttered Dr. Elliot. "What nonsense now, Louisa?"

"Do you think I am blind?" she retorted. "Do you think I am a stone, destitute of feeling? Is it not too

apparent that all your thoughts, your time, your wishes are given to Clara ?"

"Oh, if you are going to begin on the old score of jealousy, I have nothing more to say," observed Dr. Elliot, carelessly ; "but I think you might exempt your own sister from such suspicions. Harriet!" he called out, throwing open the room door, "put on Master William's things, and send him down."

"I say the child shall not go back," passionately uttered Mrs. Elliot.

"And I say he shall. When you have calmed down to common sense, Louisa, you will see the folly of sacrificing his advantages to your fancies, which are as capricious as they are unjust."

"I will apply to the law—I will apply to the nearest magistrate, rather than have my child forcibly disposed of against my will," she vehemently continued.

"My dear, the law is not on your side, but on mine. A father's authority does not yield to magistrates," laughed Dr. Elliot. To preserve that nonchalant good humour was, in her present mood, as fuel heaped on fire. She would rather he had struck her.

And the matter ended by his taking William back to Mrs. Turnbull's.

"Loo's furiously savage," he thought to himself as he went. "But she should not take such crotchets into her head."

Mrs. Elliot certainly was "savage" as she sat alone that long evening. Things wore to her jaundiced mind a worse appearance than they really deserved. Her husband was magnified into a sort of demon Don Juan ; her sister into a beautiful siren, who lived but to attract him, and rule over her. "Oh! the blind child I was to fly in the face of my friends, and run away with Tom Elliot!" she bitterly

exclaimed. "I suppose the act is working out its own punishment; for what a life is mine! Struggling with poverty—losing my idolized children—spurned by my father—neglected by my husband—patronized by my sister, and compelled to yield my boy to her charge! His education—there it is. It ought to go on, yet we have not the means to pursue it; and never shall have, it seems to me."

"Why not ask my father?" The question came from her own heart, but with a sudden intensity that startled her into believing that some one at her elbow had whispered it. "Why not go to him now, this very moment, at the hotel, and press it on him?"

Mrs. Elliot was in that excited state that sways to action. Calling the maid to sit upstairs, lest the child should cry, she put on her things and went out.

The Royal Arms was not far off; a handsome hotel, with a flight of steps, and a blazing gas-lamp at its entrance. She turned her face away from the light. It was striking ten as she ascended to the door. The landlord himself happened to be crossing the passage.

"Is a gentleman of the name of Freer stopping here?" inquired Mrs. Elliot.

"Freer? No, ma'am."

"A friend of Mr. Turnbull's in the Crescent," she explained. "He came this afternoon and engaged a bedroom."

"Oh, that gentleman—I did not know his name. Wears a bag-wig, ma'am?"

"The same."

"He has not come in yet."

But as they stood there, some one else came up the steps, and passed without notice; an old gentleman in a bag-wig. The landlord was pressing forward to mention the lady, but she touched his arm to detain him.

"Not here, in this public passage," she whispered, shrinking into a corner. "I will follow to his bedroom. I am his daughter. There has been a difference between us and we have not met for years. If you have children you can feel for me."

The landlord looked at her compassionately, at her pale face and visible emotion. He stood before her till Mr. Freer had received his candle from the hands of the waiter, and had gone upstairs.

He was winding up his watch when Mrs. Elliot entered. She closed the door and stood before him. He turned round in surprise, but he did not recognize her in the dim light. Her agitation was great, she became hysterical, and fell forward at his feet.

"Oh, father! forgive, forgive me!" she sobbed out.

Mr. Freer started from her, almost in affright. "Louisa! —Elliot! you! What brings you here?" The Christian name had arisen involuntarily to his lips. He seemed to add the other by way of counteracting his familiarity.

"Sorrow brings me here—misery brings me. Father, I cannot live without your forgiveness. I think you must have cursed me, and that the curse is still clinging to us, for nothing has prospered with me since I left your home."

"I have not cursed you," he said, still standing aloof from her

"Will you accord me your forgiveness?" she continued to ask.

"Yes, if you can be satisfied with the letter and not the spirit."

She looked at him inquiringly, her lips parted, her thin white hands raised in supplication.

"If to say that I forgive you will avail, that forgiveness you may take," he said, answering her look. "But when

you cast me off to become the wife of Thomas Elliot, you put a bar to all future intercourse between us."

"Your full and free forgiveness," she continued to implore.

"My free forgiveness," he repeated, "but not my friendship. You have your husband's."

"He has not been to me the husband I expected—hoped for," she cried, saying more than she would have said but for the jealous, angry feeling that was rife within her so especially on that night.

The lawyer smiled, a grim smile. "Few wives, when they marry as you did, do find their husbands what they expected."

She looked earnestly at him. She had risen and stood before him, her hands clasped still. "Oh, father, father, that I had never left your home!" she wailed. "At times I said to myself, 'Let me cheat my memory, and persuade it that all these years have been a dream—that I shall awake and find myself Louisa Freer once more!"

"Ah," returned the lawyer; "many a one would give their lives to awaken from the same dream."

"It is not visited on him as it is on me," she added, her cheeks flushing. "Hour after hour, whilst I am sitting alone, brooding over the past, striving to stave off present annoyances, he spends away from me, seeking only how he may amuse himself."

"Nothing else could be expected from a man of the disposition of Thomas Elliot but that he would seek his own amusement, married or single. I could have told you that years ago."

"I know you never liked him, papa; but will you not be reconciled to him?"

"Never!" vehemently uttered Lawyer Freer. "We will not allude to the subject."

"I came here to urge another plea," she sadly added, after an interval of silence. "To ask you to help me; we are very poor."

"It is waste of time," was the stern reiteration of Lawyer Freer. "Thomas Elliot has no help from me, before my death or after it."

"It is not for him," she eagerly rejoined, her eyes glistening with excitement. "Father, I declare to you that I ask for it but to thwart my husband, not to assist him. You have seen a child of mine at Mrs. Turnbull's?"

"I have seen a child there," he coldly answered. "I believe my daughter once mentioned that it was yours."

My daughter! Well, she deserved it.

"It is my only boy: the rest were girls, and they have all died, save one. Father, I named him William, after you."

"I had been better pleased that you had named him any other name to associate with that of Elliot," was the disheartening answer.

"It is for him that I need assistance," she resumed. "I want to place him at school. Oh, sir! if you knew all, perhaps you would aid me to do it."

"What mistaken notion are you labouring under?" returned Mr. Freer. "Help a child of Thomas Elliot's! Has he been sending you on this strange errand?"

"He does not know I am here. He was absent when I stole out of my home to ask this. It would be against his will if the boy were placed at school, for he wishes him to remain with Mrs. Turnbill. Do you remember, father, how Clara used to tyrannize over me at home—how she used to put upon me?"

"It may possibly have been the case. She was older than you."

"Sir, you knew she did, though you may not care to

recall it. But she does so still, and surely she is not justified in this. I have not a will of my own, especially as regards the boy ; every wish I express she opposes, and Dr. Elliot upholds her. I could bear this," passionately went on Mrs. Elliot, disclosing what she would have shrunk from in a calmer moment—" I could bear her encouraging the child's disobedience, but what I cannot bear is that she should draw my husband's affections away from me."

" I do not understand," replied Mr. Freer.

" Because you do not know Clara," said Mrs. Elliot. " She was as fond of Tom Elliot as I was, in those old days, but she had more worldly prudence. Who first encouraged him to our house ?—she did. Who flirted with, and attracted him ?—she did. And when the truth came out, that he loved me, she betrayed the tale to you in her jealous anger. Then came forward Squire Turnbull. I was a young, frightened child, and I did not dare to object to him ; so, to escape, I rushed upon a worse course."

Lawyer Freer was knitting his brows. Parts of her speech had grated on his ear.

" She never forgave me from the morning she knew Tom Elliot cared for me and not for her ; she has never forgiven me yet. And now they have learnt to care for each other ; the time, the attentions, the love my husband owes me are given to her. Believe me or not, as you please, sir, it is the disgraceful truth."

" Disgraceful, degenerate girls, both of you," he exclaimed angrily, " to be led away by a man like him ! "

" So I come to you for aid," she continued ; " and I have explained this, not to betray her folly, but to justify my application. If I could place the boy at school, we should no longer be under obligations to Mrs. Turnbull, neither would the child be an excuse for my husband's visits there. You cannot countenance such conduct in my sister."

"I have nothing to do with Mrs. Turnbull's conduct. She is old enough and wise enough to take care of herself, and I do not fear her not doing so. And for you—should you ever become a widow, then you may apply to me."

The tears were struggling down Mrs. Elliot's cheeks. She ventured to touch and take her father's hand. "For my peace and William's welfare I implore aid," she said; "not for Dr. Elliot."

Mr. Freer did not withdraw his hand, and he did not return her clasp; he suffered it to remain passively in hers. "You are asking what is not in my power to accord, Louisa," he at length said. "When you left my protection for Thomas Elliot's, I took an oath that he and his should remain strangers to me; that so long as he should live, they should never enjoy aught of mine. As well ask me to break this hand"—and he held it out—"as to break my oath."

"So there goes another of my life's delusions," she uttered, in tones of anguish—"nearly the last. In my sad moments a ray of light has flashed across me—a vision of my being reconciled to my father; of his blessing me and my children, a blessing that might have been worked out in life. How could I have expected it? Father, farewell. God bless you and pity me!"

"Fare you well, Louisa."

He took the candle and followed her to the door, intending to light her down the stairs, but the rays of a lamp hanging outside rendered it unnecessary. He stood there, and when she glanced back, from the end of the corridor, she saw him looking after her. Yearningly she strained her eyes to his, and her lips moved, and her steps halted. Perhaps she would have flown back to him—she had it in her heart to do so—to fall upon his neck, and, with kisses and sobs, implore a more loving forgiveness; but he turned

in and closed the door, even as she looked, and she passed swiftly down the stairs, with a breaking spirit. It was the last time they met on earth.

Nearly the last of her life's delusions, Mrs. Elliot had said. What else remained to her? Her children. William departed, as before, with Mr. and Mrs. Turnbull for Nearfordshire. With the latter's absence, Louisa again forgot her jealous troubles, and peace—rather cold perhaps, but undisturbed by storms—was resumed between herself and her husband. Upon her young child, the girl, every wish and hope seemed now concentred. The love she lavished upon the infant was a matter of remark to all who had an opportunity of witnessing it: *they* loved their children, but not with an all-absorbing passion such as this. Did Mrs. Elliot ever hear that a check, sooner or later, always comes to love so inordinate? She would have known it, had she looked much into the world. "Oh! when my darling can speak, when it can answer me with its dear little voice, I shall be too happy," she was wont to say. "My father has abandoned me, my husband has forgotten his love for me, my noble boy gladdens other eyes than mine, but in this precious child shall lie my recompense. Make haste, my darling; make haste to speak!"

But the child seemed backward in speaking, and in walking also. Fifteen months old, and it attempted neither. Master Willy, at that age, had gone, with his sturdy legs, all over the room, and made himself heard when he wanted bread-and-butter. "Girls are not so forward as boys," reasoned Mrs. Elliot.

It was a pretty child, and would have been more so but for an unusual look about the forehead, and a vacant stare in its blue eyes. Once or twice that vacant gaze had stricken a chill to the mother's heart, bringing with it a

wild fear, a dread, which she drove back as some far-off horror, that would kill her if ever it came near.

One afternoon the servant, Harriet, had the baby lying on her knee. She had just come in from a walk, had taken off its things, and was now looking curiously at its face, and touching its head here and there. Dr. Elliot was stretched on the sofa, reading, as Harriet thought, but his eyes were raised over the book, watching her motions.

"Harriet, what are you looking at?"

The question was sudden, and startled the servant. She replied, in a confused, vague manner, that she was looking at "nothing particular."

Dr. Elliot came forward, drew a chair in front of them, and sat down, gazing first at her, then at the child. "What *were* you thinking of, Harriet," he persisted, "when you touched the child's forehead?"

Harriet burst into tears. She was very fond of the infant. "I hope you will not ask me, sir," she rejoined; "I should be afraid to tell you."

"Afraid of a fiddlestick!" returned Dr. Elliot. "If you fancy there is anything the matter with her, speak, and it may be"—he seemed to hesitate for a word—"remedied. Many an infant has been ruined for life through its ailments not being known."

"It was not me, sir," began Harriet, looking round at the door, which was ajar, to make sure her mistress was not there, though, indeed, she could then hear her overhead in her own room. "It's true I have wondered at the child's being so dull, though I never thought much about it; but this afternoon, as I was sitting on a bench in the promenade walk, old Mrs. Chivers came up—she as goes out nursing."

"I know," said Dr. Elliot. "Well?"

"She had her daughter's child with her, a lively little thing of eleven months. It was stepping about, holding on by our knees, and laughing.

"'That's what your little charge won't do on a sudden,' she begins to me.

"'Why not?' says I. 'Little Miss Clara's backward, but she'll be all right when she gets her teeth.'

"'Why, she's got her teeth,' returns Nurse Chivers; 'hasn't she?'

"'Only six,' I said. 'Many a child's more backward in walking than she.'

"'I don't say she won't walk in time,' went on Dame Chivers, 'but you can't have handled that baby for fifteen months, and not have found out what's the matter with it. Folks are talking of it in the town, and saying——'" Harriet stopped.

"Go on," cried Dr. Elliot, with compressed lips.

"'And saying,' Nurse Chivers continued, 'that the doctor must know it, if its poor mamma does not. Though the look of the baby might have told her that it is'—— I don't like," broke off Harriet, with renewed tears, "to repeat the cruel word she said—though Nurse Chivers was grieved herself, and did not mean it unkindly. But if she's right, the dear baby will never have wit nor sense through life to comfort us."

Tighter, far tighter was the strain upon his lips, and a dark shade of pain marked his handsome face. He bent his head over his child. It lay wide awake, but perfectly passive in Harriet's lap, its lips apart, its glistening eyes staring upwards.

"Oh, sir," sobbed Harriet, "is it true?" And then she saw the expression on the doctor's countenance, and knew that the news was no news to him. "Whoever will break it to my mistress?" she wailed.

"It must be suffered to come upon her by degrees," was his answer. But had Dr. Elliot raised his eyes, he would have seen that it *had* come upon her, and not by degrees. She had come softly downstairs and inside the room, lest the baby slept, just in time to hear the dreadful sentence; and there she stood, transfixed and rigid, her eyes staring as wildly as the child's. That far-off horror, seen but at a distance, had come near—into her very home. Some instinct caused Harriet to look round; she saw her mistress, and shrieked out. Dr. Elliot raised his head, bounded forward and caught her in his arms.

"Louisa! Good heavens! I did not know you were there. My dearest wife! do not distress yourself; all will be well; it is not so bad as these women think. Louisa! Louisa!"

No, no, the dreadful shock had come to her, and nothing could soothe or soften it. When she recovered power of motion, she took the ill-fated child from the servant, laid its cheek against hers, and moaned as she swayed with it backwards and forwards. Suddenly she looked up at her husband—"If we could die—I and she—both of us!" she murmured in a despairing, helpless sort of way, almost as if her own intellect were going

It was indeed a fearful visitation, and it made itself heard in throbs of agony. Her brain was beating, her heart working: care upon care, trouble upon trouble, had followed her wilful marriage, and now the last and greatest comfort, the only joy that seemed left to her, had turned into a thing to be dreaded worse than death. She had so passionately wished for this child, and now that it was given, what was it? Her husband sat regarding her in gloomy silence, pitying her—she could see that—pitying the ill-fated child. Oh, if she could but undo her work and her disobedience; if she could but go back years, and be once

more careless, happy, dutiful Louisa Freer! Not even Tom Elliot should tempt her away then.

How many, as her father said, have echoed the same useless prayer! Ill-doing first, repentance afterwards; but repentance can rarely, if ever, repair the ill-doing. All must bear the sorrows they bring upon themselves, even though they may end but with life; but it seemed to Louisa Elliot, in that first hour of her full affliction, ay, and for years afterwards, that her punishment was greater than had ever yet fallen upon woman.

BOOK THE SIXTH.

CHAPTER XVI.

HALLIWELL HOUSE.

We must return to Halliwell House—a distinct thing from The House of Halliwell. Halliwell House was the title which Hester and Lucy had chosen to bestow upon their new residence when they went into it, and we must see how they were getting on.

It cannot be said that they had no success; but they did not succeed sufficiently to pay their expenses, and their little capital was often drawn upon. Their number of pupils fluctuated much: one term they would have a tolerably good school, the next term it would be small. Many an anxious conversation did they have, many an hour of more anxious thought, many a sleepless night. To fall into debt and difficulty; to spend the last fragment of their capital in striving to avert it; to find their efforts fruitless, their funds gone, and they turned from their present shelter, their slender means of living, without any definite prospect of finding another—these were the fears and visions that continually disturbed their rest. Oh, Heaven pity and aid all who are struggling, as they were, to keep up appearances and earn a respectable living, and who find their means and hopes growing less and less day by day!

"I have a scheme running in my head," Lucy said one evening: "suppose we take boarders?"

"Take boarders!" exclaimed Hester.

"Yes, why not? They would spend most of their time in the drawing-room, which we seldom use, and we have one or two bedrooms to spare. It would really be a great help to us until our school becomes more prosperous."

But it would hardly do to take boarders in a ladies' school," returned Hester. "It seems an impossible combination. Some of the parents might even object to it."

"Most of them would never know it," said Lucy. "It cannot be any possible detriment to the pupils—can make no difference to them whatever. We should only receive ladies. In fact, if there were any fear of their clashing, I don't see why they should not be quite apart and cater for themselves. If we had quiet people, it would be very little trouble."

"And, as you say it would be a great help," repeated Hester. "I will sleep upon it, Lucy."

She did so. And the next day she intimated to their stationer and to one or two house-agents that they were desirous of receiving one or two boarders into their house.

Three weeks went on, and not a soul applied. But one day, Sarah, the servant, went to the schoolroom and beckoned to her mistress.

"It's some folks after the rooms, ma'am," she whispered. "They look likely people." The girl was really as anxious as her mistresses.

Hester proceeded to the drawing-room, and two ladies rose at her entrance. Agreeable in person, and neatly dressed in mourning, the elder was about three or four and thirty, a rosy-cheeked woman, with quiet dark eyes; the younger, who was fairer and more delicate looking, was her sister.

"You wish to receive boarders, we hear," said the elder, presenting her card. "It is not quite what we are in search of. We rather wanted rooms with ladies where we might provide for our own table. We are not very strong and have to be specially fastidious in what we take."

Hester glanced at the card, and read "Mrs. Archer." "I beg your pardon," she said; "are you a widow?"

"No. My husband is abroad."

"Because we should decline to take a gentleman; it would hardly be suitable in a school. Only ladies."

"Well, he is abroad," the lady repeated; "it is only for ourselves. Do you think you could receive us on such conditions?"

"I think we might," replied Hester. "You might have this sitting-room, and one bedroom opens from it. The other——"

"We only require one bedroom," interrupted Mrs. Archer, as she rose to inspect it.

The bargain was soon concluded. They were to pay thirty shillings a week, and promised to come in on the morrow.

"What extras will there be?" inquired the younger lady, Miss Graves.

"Extras!" repeated Hester, "not any. Excepting—I believe it is customary—some little gratuity to the servant." She had not been in the habit of doing this sort of thing.

"What about linen? are we to find it?" asked Lucy, when told of the success.

"Linen!" said Hester, dubiously; "I forgot it completely. I never said a word about it"

"Nor the ladies?'

"Nor the ladies. I remember they said they had a little plate of their own they could use."

"Then they take it for granted we find it, no doubt. Well, it will not much matter, either way. Did you ask for references, Hester?"

She really had not done so, and was obliged to confess it. Lucy laughed. Hester, who was generally so very cautious!

The ladies duly arrived, and for some weeks things went on with satisfaction; they paid their rent regularly. Then they began to grow behindhand, and made excuses from time to time, which to Hester and Lucy sounded very plausible. But when the debt amounted to nearly £13, and still no money was forthcoming, they grew uneasy. They had trusted to this to help them with the coming quarter's rent.

Hester was in the kitchen one morning, making apple-dumplings for dinner, when Sarah, who stood by, paring apples, began to talk.

"I think they are queer customers we have got hold of, ma'am," she said.

"What do you mean?" inquired her mistress.

"Well, for one thing, I fancy they have come to the end of their tether, and haven't neither cross nor coin to bless themselves with. They are living now upon a'most nothing. And that's the reason, ma'am, they wouldn't board with you. They couldn't afford it. And where are their spoons gone to?"

"Their spoons!"

"The four table-spoons put on their table every day for dinner. It's a good month since the two first disappeared — that handsome silver cream-jug vanished about the same time—and now the two last is gone. When I was laying the cloth for dinner yesterday—them precious herrings they bought—I went on a-hunting for the spoons, and Miss Graves said, 'Oh, I have got them. I'll put them on the

table myself presently, Sarah.' But none came down to be washed."

"Sarah! where do you think they have gone to?"

"Well," answered Sarah, who was worth her weight in gold for an honest, hard-working servant, though free and rough-speaking, "I should say they have pawned them."

"Dear, dear!" lamented Hester, for she did not affect to misunderstand her; "are they reduced to such straits as that?"

"Law, ma'am! let 'em hope they may never be reduced to no worse," retorted Sarah. "You don't know the schemes and contrivances for getting along in London, when one's hard up. It's a mercy there's such things to go to. Since the baker would not leave the bread on credit, our two ladies don't take in enough to feed 'em. They have not had meat, neither, for three days, nor nothing to substitute for it but them herrings yesterday; which was anything but of the freshest. Miss Graves—it's she as generally speaks—is always ready with excuses: they have colds, and can't eat, or they've this, or that."

"Do they owe much to the baker?"

"Five shillings, odd. He's a cautious man, is our baker, and says he never trusts no boarders. And now," added Sarah, stopping in her paring and looking at her mistress, "they don't take in any milk."

Hester went on mixing her crust and ruminating. She felt much sorrow for them, for she was sure they were not systematic deceivers; and she felt for herself. She looked upon the money as lost, and she wanted it badly.

"I should like to know what they mean to do for coals," resumed Sarah; "there ain't above a couple of scuttlefuls left. They'll be wanting us to lend 'em some: but if we do, we may whistle for 'em back again. Haven't I pared enough yet, ma'am?"

Hester had been paying no attention to the apples, and Sarah had done too many. So, to prevent waste, she determined to make a pie, and so use them up. Popping her dumplings, when they were ready, into the saucepan, she took down the flour-jar again.

Besides this, she had to slice and salt some red cabbage for pickling, so that it had struck one o'clock before she had well finished. She told Sarah to take up the dinner.

It happened to be Irish stew that day, and Sarah reached the large hash-dish and put it on the table, and then, taking the saucepan from the fire, she turned the greater portion of its contents into the dish. Hester went into the pantry to put away some of the things she had been using, and just then Miss Graves entered the kitchen, nearly running against Sarah and her hash-dish, which she was carrying out.

Miss Graves went towards the fire, not seeing Hester. And oh, the pinched look of care and want that her face wore! It grieved Hester to the heart to see it, and she wondered she had never noticed it before. She looked with eager eyes into the saucepan, which Sarah had lodged, without its lid, on the fender, and then turned away, as if she would shut out its sight. On the table there lay a little heap of stew, splashed by Sarah when pouring it out, and she stole to the table, and caught this up greedily with her finger, and ate it. Hester heard Sarah coming back again, and had to come out of her hiding-place—not, indeed, that she had gone in to hide. Miss Graves started when she saw her, and her face flushed. Hester pretended not to have seen her until then.

"Is it you?" she said. "What a cold day! Pray take care of your sleeve against the table: something seems to have been spilt on it. I hope it has not touched it."

"Oh no," said Miss Graves, brushing away at her right-hand cuff with a nervous movement.

"Some of them young misses jumped about when they saw and smelt the Irish stew," observed Sarah, when she entered. "It's a rare favourite dish of theirn."

"I don't wonder at that, when it smells as savoury as yours," remarked Miss Graves.

"I looked a little to it myself to-day, and put in some thyme: it's a great improvement," said Hester. "Don't you think so?"

"I don't know," she answered. "I don't think we ever put thyme into ours."

"Then, if you'll allow me, I'll send you up a little of this," said Hester. ("For I could not bear to think that we were going to eat all we needed and that they should only long for it," she remarked to Lucy afterwards.)

"Oh, thank you," Miss Graves stammered, her face flushing again; "but—the trouble——"

"Pray don't mention it," interrupted Hester; "it is no trouble. Sarah, bring in that little dish."

She took her place at the head of the schoolroom table, and Sarah, looking as demure as if she understood nothing, took in the dish. Hester heaped it up.

But of course they could not do that every day, and circumstances grew more and more straitened with their boarders. Sarah was fond of opening her budget of wonders, as to what they did, but Hester paid little attention to her. One evening, a day or two after the school had broken up for the Christmas holidays, she came bounding into the room, with eager, wild words. Hester and Lucy were sitting by firelight, for it was the hour before tea, and she startled them both, though she spoke in a whisper.

"Ma'am! Miss Lucy! as sure as you are both alive, them two have a gentleman upstairs!"

"Who is he? What is he come for? Money, I suppose."

"Not that sort of a man," retorted Sarah, an indefinite amount of contempt in her tone for her mistress's simplicity —"not folks as call. A man locked up with 'em; concealed in their bedroom."

"How can you assert such a thing, Sarah?" exclaimed Lucy, sharply. "If they heard you, they might have you up before a police court."

"Shouldn't care if they did," returned the woman. "I'd stand up for the truth there as well as here. If ever I heard a man talk, I heard one up in their room just now."

"Then you did not *see* him?" observed Lucy, sarcastically

"Nor didn't want to, Miss Lucy, if you mean for convincing my eyes. I'll tell you, ma'am, how it was," she added, turning to her mistress — as Hester was always called. "Their candles be all out—the last pound have lasted 'em three weeks, if it have lasted one, so it's plain they have mostly sat in the dark. In getting the candlesticks out, just now, I remembered there was nothing to put in 'em, so up I went into the drawing-room to say so. The door was locked when I got there—and they have kept it so for the last few days, which is another odd thing, and took to making their own bed, which is odder still. I wasn't in a sunny humour—locking up rooms like that, indeed!—and I gave the latch a twist and a sharp push, and open it flew. In I went: there wasn't a bit of fire in the grate, but they have it now in their bedroom instead—I should like to know why. It was next to pitch dark, save a glimmer of light that came through the bedroom door, which was on the jar, and as I stood there a strange voice, a man's voice, called out, 'I am so thirsty! If there's nothing else, give me water. My lips and tongue are parched.'"

"Sarah, how can you be so foolish?" uttered Lucy. "Mrs. Archer speaks gruffly."

"A man's voice it was. I'll take my Bible oath on it," persisted Sarah. "I ran against the table then, and caused a noise—not for the purpose: I was stepping softly forrard to peep in, and came in contact with one of its legs. Out flew Miss Graves, just as if I'd been a robber, and banged-to the door behind her.

"'Who's there?' she called out: for now the door was shut we couldn't see the ghost of one another.

"'It's only me, ma'am,' I answered. 'There ain't no candles left.'

"'Oh—well—I—I'll see about it,' she said. 'We don't want them yet; we are sitting by firelight. How did you get in, Sarah? I thought I slipped the bolt; for when we are sitting by ourselves up here, and you all downstairs, we feel timid.'

"'You couldn't have slipped it very far, ma'am,' I said; "I gave the door a smart push, and it opened. Of course I shouldn't have done it if I had known you'd fastened me out; but this is an awk'ard latch, and used to have a trick of catching, and I thought no more but what it was at it again.' So, with that, ma'am, I came away downstairs, and she came across the room and bolted the door again."

"Your ears heard double," cried Lucy. "You do fancy strange things sometimes, Sarah. Recollect the evening you came in to us last summer and protested Miss Brown was talking out of the front window. And she fast asleep in bed all the time at the back of the house."

"That Miss Brown had as many ruses as a fox," uttered Sarah, "and I shall never believe but what she was talking out at the front winder; and to somebody over the wall, too! However, she's gone, so it don't matter; but,

whether or no, I ain't mistaken now, and I'll lay my life there is a man up there."

Lucy raised the fire into a blaze, which lighted up the amused, incredulous smile on her face. But Hester staggered. The girl was so very earnest, and she knew she had her share of strong common sense.

"It was a gentleman's voice," she resumed, "and he spoke as if he was tired, or else in pain. Suppose I go and borrow the next-door ladder, and climb up to the winder, and have a look in?"

"Yes," cried Lucy, laughing heartily as she put down the poker, "do, Sarah. Never mind falls."

"What can I say we want with it? They'll think night's a queer time to borrow a garden ladder. Suppose I go with a tale that an obstinate fit has took our curtains, and they won't draw, and I want to get up to the rings? It is——"

"Do not run on so, Sarah," interrupted her mistress; "you know I should permit nothing of the sort. And if the blind is down, as it is almost sure to be, you could not see into the room if you did get up to the window."

"I'll go and see," was Sarah's answer, as she darted into the hall and thence to the garden.

"It is down," she said, returning again. "But just come and look here, Miss Lucy. If there isn't the shadow of a man's hat on the blind, I never saw a hat yet."

They went out into the cold night, and Hester followed them. There really was the outline of a man's hat thrown upon the blind. It seemed as if the little bamboo table had been drawn from the corner of the room—to get at the cupboard, probably—and was placed in front of the window. On it stood the hat, and the opposite firelight threw its shadow on the blind. As they looked, the form of one of the ladies passed before the window and lifted the table

back to its place, out of sight, and Hester and Lucy went shivering into the house again.

"Now, ma'am, what do you think?" asked Sarah, triumphantly.

"Why, I think that some one has called," resolutely replied Hester. "The ladies are most respectable in their conduct; perfectly so: it is impossible to think otherwise. You may have been out of the way when he—whoever it is—came to the door, and one of them have come down and let him in. As to his being in the bedroom, it is natural they should be where the fire is, this cold night."

"Not a soul has been to the door this afternoon," persisted Sarah. "I have been ironing, and have never stirred out of the kitchen. But now, ma'am, to prove the thing, I'll just turn the key of the front door, and put it in my pocket. If it is a visitor, he must ask to be let out; if it's not——"

Sarah said no more. For who should have entered, after a tap at the door, but Miss Graves. She held a tea-cup in her hand.

"I am very sorry to trouble you, Miss Halliwell," she said hesitatingly—she was a bad beggar—"but would you oblige us with a little tea to-night? We are out of it, and it is late to go and purchase any."

"Certainly," answered Hester, pleasantly, rising to unlock the old side-board drawer, where she kept her tea-caddy. "Nothing is so refreshing as a cup of tea."

"We don't in general care for it," observed Miss Graves, "but my sister is very poorly to-night, and complains of thirst. Thank you much," she added, taking the cup from Hester.

"Don't you want water for it, ma'am?" called out Sarah. "Our kettle is on the boil."

"Yes, if you please," she answered. "I will come into the kitchen and make it now."

She did so, having a contest with Sarah afterwards. The latter wanted to carry up the tray with the cups and saucers, but Miss Graves insisted on doing it herself.

"To keep me out of the room," muttered Sarah when she was gone. "For fear I should see what I should see."

However, in about half an hour the bell rang, and up bounded Sarah. It was to take away the tray; and when she had put it in the kitchen she went into the parlour again, where Hester and Lucy were now at their tea.

"Well, what did you see?" inquired Lucy.

"Nothing, ma'am; and didn't expect to," was Sarah's sulky reply. "They took care of that before they called me up."

"Did you go into the bedroom?"

"Yes. Miss Graves was sitting at the table, as if she'd been making tea; and Mrs. Archer was by the fire, looking well enough, as far as I saw by firelight. They had stirred the blaze up just as I went in, as an excuse for having no candles."

"And what about the gentleman?" laughed Lucy.

"I expect he was in the bed, or on it, for the curtains was all drawn close round it as tight as wax, like I have never seen 'em before. I'm sure, ma'am, this affair's as good as a play."

"Not to me," sighed Hester, "if there should be anything in it."

"And the hat?" continued Lucy.

"Well, I was stupid there. I was so struck with them curtains—picturing what was inside 'em, and peering if there wasn't a slit as big as a needle to look through, that I never thought of the hat or the table. But don't you flatter yourself it was there, Miss Lucy; they'd take precious good care to put it away afore they rang for me. I've a notion the man must be ill."

"Why so?"

"Because I heard him say he was parched, as I told you, ma'am. And then, their having the tea. That wasn't for Mrs. Archer; there's no more the matter with her than there is with me. Besides, who's the toast-and-water for? They told me to make a quart-jug full, and Miss Graves said she'd come down and fetch it."

They heard no more that night of the strange visitor. If he was there, he remained, for Sarah carried out her threat, and put the key of the front door in her pocket. The next morning Hester went into the kitchen to give orders.

"Look here, ma'am," cried Sarah, exhibiting some meat upon a plate. "Miss Graves has been out and brought in this bit of scrag of mutton and them two turnips, and she said she supposed you'd obleege 'em with a bit of parsley out of the garden. It's to make some broth for her sister, she said, and they'll stew it upstairs; and I'm to take it up with the saucepan of water. Not more than sixpence she couldn't have gave for it," concluded Sarah, taking up the meat with an action of contempt, and flopping it down on the plate again.

"Sarah, you are unfeeling," exclaimed her mistress reprovingly. "The poor ladies are much to be pitied."

"Pitied, indeed! What business have they in a house like ours, with no money to carry 'em on in it?" retorted Sarah, who was in one of her worst humours. "And the man they have up there—perhaps he is to be pitied, too!"

"I must forbid further allusion to that absurdity, Sarah. There is no man up there; the very idea is preposterous."

"Very well, ma'am. If anything bad turns up out of this, don't say I did not give warning of it. One on 'em slept on the sofa in the drawing-room last night, for I see

the bed-clothes there this morning. I think that proves something."

The girl tossed her head, and went out of the kitchen. Hester felt uneasy all that day; but nothing fresh arose. Night came, and Lucy, who had a bad cold (caught through flying out the previous night to stare at their window), went to bed at nine o'clock. At ten Hester sent Sarah, sitting up herself to finish a little sewing that she had in hand. After that she sat warming her feet, and it was within a few minutes of eleven when she rose to go to bed.

CHAPTER XVII.

AFTER MANY YEARS.

HESTER had the candle in one hand, and her work in the other, and was going softly up the stairs, when the drawing-room door was flung violently open, and out dashed Mrs. Archer, nearly knocking Hester and her load down together.

"Oh, Miss Halliwell, where's Sarah?" she exclaimed, in nervous excitement. "In mercy let her run for a doctor!"

"What is the matter?" asked Hester. "Who is ill?'

"Oh, come and see! It is of no use attempting concealment now." And seizing Hester's arm, she hurried her through the drawing-room. Miss Graves was getting up from the sofa, where she had retired to rest, and Hester put down her work, and went, with her candle, into the bedroom. On the bed, his head raised high upon a pillow, lay a gentleman, his eyes closed and his face still and white, whilst drops of blood were slowly issuing from his mouth.

"Is he dead?" uttered Hester, in the first shock of horrified surprise.

"Where's Sarah? where's Sarah?" was all the answer of Mrs. Archer. "We *must* have a doctor."

"Sarah is in bed. I will go up and call her."

"In bed! then I'll go for one myself." And, throwing on a shawl and bonnet, Mrs. Archer darted down the stairs, but stopped ere she reached the bottom, and looked up

at Hester, who was lighting her. "The nearest surgeon —where?"

"About ten doors higher up the road. You'll see the lamp over the door."

"Ah, yes, I forgot;" and she flew on.

Hester followed, for she remembered that the key of the gate was hanging up in the kitchen, and Mrs. Archer could not get out without it. Then she called up Sarah, and went back to the room.

"Who is this gentleman?" she whispered to Miss Graves.

"Mr. Archer, my sister's husband," was the reply; and, just then, the invalid opened his eyes and looked at them.

Never will Hester forget that moment. The expression of those eyes flashed on the chords of her memory like a ray of light, and gradually she recognized the features, though they were altered, worn, and wasted. Archer? Archer? Yes; although the name had never struck her before as in connection with *him*, there could be no doubt about it. She was gazing on him who had been so dear to her in early life—too dear, for the ending that came.

"He is a clergyman—the Reverend George Archer?" she whispered to Miss Graves.

"Yes. How did you know?"

Poor Hester did not answer. Those old days were coming back to her, as in a dream. The happy home at Seaford, their engagement, the few weeks of transient bliss that followed, the bright vision of the Lady Georgina, and then the wretched parting. And now thus to meet him! Lying on a bed in her own house, and not long for this world!

His wife returned with the doctor. He said the case was not so serious as it appeared; that the blood came from a small vessel ruptured on the chest, not the lungs.

Hester remained with Mrs. Archer that night. Sarah made a fire in the drawing-room, and they sat by it while he dozed. Mrs. Archer spoke of her troubles, and sobbed bitterly.

"Has he been long here?" inquired Hester, wondering how in the world he had got in.

"It was the day your pupils were going away," replied Mrs. Archer. "I was standing at the window, watching the carriage which had come to fetch some of them, when I saw my husband coming down the road, evidently looking out for the house. He appeared ill and thin, walked as if his strength were gone—but I knew him, and flew down to the gate, which was open as well as the house-door. As it happened, no one was in the hall when we came upstairs; I heard Sarah's voice on the upper flight; she was bringing down luggage, but she did not see us."

"But you ought to have told me," urged Hester.

"I know that," she rejoined; "and such a thing as taking him in, clandestinely, never entered my thoughts. It arose with circumstances. Look at our position: you positively refused to receive a gentleman here; but he had come, and how were we to remove to other lodgings, owing you what we do, destitute of means, almost destitute of food? So there he lay, ill, on that bed. Reproach me as much as you will, Miss Halliwell; turn us into the road, if you must do so: it seems that little can add to my trouble and perplexity now. There have been moments lately when I have not known how to refrain from—from —running away—and——"

"And what?" asked Hester.

"Why, I had thought the calm bed of a river would be to me as rest after toil."

"Goodness me, Mrs. Archer!" uttered Hester, half in surprise, half in indignation; "a Christian must never

use such language as that, while there's a Heaven to supplicate for refuge. All who ask for strength *to bear*, find it there."

"I have had no happiness in my married life," she went on to say. "It is—let me see—six years ago, now. Mr. Archer was a working curate in London: a weary life he led of it in that large parish of poor people. Soon after we married, his health began to fail; he used to seem dispirited, and the duties were too heavy for him. I took it into my head that some sorrow was upon him; that he had never really loved me. I don't know. Once I taxed him with it, with both, but he seemed surprised, said he thought he had been always kind, as indeed he had, and I let the idea drop. His health grew worse, change of scene and air were essential to him, and he received an appointment as foreign chaplain—army chaplain I think it was—and went out with that Spanish Legion. Later, I and my sister lost our money. My brother, with whom it was placed, failed, and we were deprived of our income. Latterly we have been living by—it is of no use to mince the matter—by pledging things; and now my husband has come home without his pay, and cannot get the arrears which are due to him. He says they have all been put off, officers and soldiers—not one of them has received a farthing. The Spanish Government ought to be prosecuted."

There was a pretty state of things! That sick clergyman in the house, and all three of them without means. Lucy was up in arms when told the news.

"They must go out of the house; they must, Hester; even if we pay for lodgings for them. If he dies, and has to be buried from here, it will be the ruin of the school. Dear, dear!—to think of its being George Archer! How things come about in this world!"

Mrs. Archer wrote to her brother, doubting, however, his ability to assist them, but at the end of a week there came a ten-pound note. Mr. Archer was better then.

"Now I will not take any of it," Hester said to Mrs. Archer. "You shall keep it to start afresh with in new lodgings, but you must leave these."

That same afternoon, Mrs. Archer and her sister went out to seek some, and Hester, according to their request, took her work and went to sit with Mr. Archer.

He was sitting up in the easy-chair, the one which had been Mrs. Halliwell's, and the Major's before her. Many a time had she sat in it when talking to George Archer in the old days. A queerish sort of feeling came over Hester as she took her place opposite to him, for it was the first time they had been alone together; but she made herself busy with her sewing.

They conversed on indifferent subjects—the weather, his medicine, and so on; when all at once he wheeled that chair closer to Hester's, and spoke in low, deep tones:

"Hester, have you ever forgiven me?"

"Indeed, yes; long ago."

"Then it is more than I have done by myself," he groaned. "But I was rightly served."

Hester looked up at him, and then down at her work again.

"You heard, perhaps, how she jilted me. Hester, as truly as that you are sitting there, working, she drew me on—drew me on from the first, to flirt with and admire her!"

"You are speaking of——" Hester could not bring out the word.

"*Her*—Georgina. Who else? And when she saw, as I know she did see, to what a passionate height my love was

reaching, she fooled me more and more. I did not see my folly at the time; I was too infatuated to do so; but I have cursed it ever since, as I dare say you have."

"Hush! hush!" interrupted Hester.

"And when it was betrayed to Lord Seaford and he drove me away, to part with me as she did, without a sigh, without a regret!" he went on, not deigning to notice the interruption. "Hester, you were *well* avenged."

"Do not excite yourself, Mr. Archer."

"How I got over those first few weeks I don't know, and shudder to remember. Then came her marriage: I read it in the papers. Heartless, wicked girl! And she had solemnly protested to me she did not care for Mr. Caudour. Well! troubles and mad grief do come to an end; and so, thank God! does life."

"What was your career afterwards?"

"My career for a time was perfect idleness. I could do nothing. Remorse for my wild infatuation had taken heavy hold upon me, and a great amount of misery was mixed up with it. Then, when I came to myself a little, I sought employment, and obtained the curacy of a parish in London, where the pay was little and the work incessant. Next, I married: not with the feeling I should have married *you*, Hester, even then; but the lady had a good income, and I had need of many luxuries—for my health was failing—or necessities, call them what you will, which my stipend would not obtain. I grew worse. I think, if I had remained in London, I should have died there, and I went out to Spain."

"Whence you have now returned?"

"Yes; penniless—done out of the money coming to me. And now the sooner I die the better, for I am only a burden to others. I am closing a life rendered useless by my own infatuated folly: my talents have been buried in a napkin,

my heart turned to gall and wormwood. Oh, Hester! again I say it, you are richly avenged."

"Have you ever met since?"

"Georgina Seaford? Never. Her husband is Lord Caudour now. I saw the old Baron's death in a stray newspaper that came out to Spain."

"I have always felt thankful for one thing," said Hester: "that she did not know of our engagement. And perhaps that might offer some slight excuse for her conduct."

"She did know of it," said Mr. Archer, quickly.

Hester looked up, pained and surprised, but still in doubt. "How could she have known of it?" she breathed.

"From me. Oh yes, I was infatuated all through the piece, and I told her that. I also told her when it was broken off. Don't execrate me, Hester. I have done nothing but execrate myself ever since. Excuse for her conduct there was none: she was a vain, heartless girl."

Hester fell into a reverie, from which she was awakened by hearing the garden gate open, and she looked from the window. "Here come your wife and Miss Graves," she said. "How soon they are in again!"

"Hester," he murmured, in an impassioned tone, seizing her hand as she was about to pass him, intending to open the drawing-room door to welcome them, for in all the little courtesies of life Hester, like her mother, was punctilious, "say you forgive me."

She leaned down, and spoke soothingly. "George, believe me, I have perfectly forgiven you: I forgave you long ago. That the trial to me was one of length and bitterness it would be affectation to deny, but I have outlived it. Let me go. They are coming up the stairs."

He pressed her hand between both his, and then kissed it as fervently as he had kissed her own lips that night, years, years before, when they were walking home, after

church, behind her mother and Lucy. She drew it hastily from him, for they were already in the drawing-room, and a feeling, long buried, very like that forgotten *love*, cast a momentary sunshine on her heart: and then she laughed at herself for being a great simpleton.

They had found lodgings, and they all moved into them the following day. Hester could only feel relieved when they had left the house.

The Archers did not get on very well. Hester often sent them a substantial plate of something, under pretence of tempting his appetite; slices of roast beef, or a tureen of nourishing broth with the meat in. Lucy would say they could not afford it, and Sarah exclaimed loudly against "cooking for other people;" but they were fellow-creatures, and in need, *and he was George Archer!* That summer put an end to his weary life.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MISSING HANDKERCHIEFS.

HESTER was wont to say that no one need envy her, or any other schoolmistress. What with the wearing labour of instructing so many hours daily, the din of the schoolroom, the crosses and vexations sure to arise with the pupils or their parents, and the worry sometimes caused by the teachers, it was anything but an easy life. A troublesome event arose with one of their teachers, a Miss Powis. But, with the reader's permission, it may be as well to give the account of it in Hester's own words. I am sure she can relate it a great deal better than I can. Therefore, for the next few pages, it is Miss Halliwell who speaks: not the author.

Miss Powis was recommended as being particularly likely to suit us. A younger sister of hers was at our school as day scholar, the parents living near in a small cottage. They had moved in a very respectable sphere of life, but had been unfortunate, and the father had obtained some employment in the City, to and from which he walked morning and evening. Miss Powis was about two and twenty, an accomplished, handsome girl, but somewhat wild and random, leading the pupils into mischief, instead of keeping them out of it. Though I cannot but say I

liked her, for she had a kind heart, and was ever ready to do a good turn for any one.

The second term she was with us, soon after the re-assembling of the pupils subsequently to the midsummer vacation, the fair took place as usual. It was a great nuisance, this fair, every summer, the noise of the drums and fifes of the show-people reaching even into our school-room, to our annoyance and the school's delight, obliging us to sit with the windows closed. No good was ever done whilst that fair lasted; lessons were not learnt, music was not practised; the children's attention being all given to those sounds in the fields at the back.

Well, it was one evening at fair time: Lucy had gone to bed with a sick headache, and a lady unexpectedly dropped in to tea, having come down by one of the City omnibuses. Of course I could not go out and leave her, so I was obliged to send Miss Powis alone with the children for their evening walk.

"Go up the Plover Road, opposite," I said to her, when they were ready, "as far as Ringfence Field, which will be a quiet rural walk; but be sure not to go within sight or hearing of that disreputable fair."

"Oh no," she replied, "not for the world;" and away they filed out at the gate.

Now what did Miss Powis do? As soon as they were beyond view of the house, she turned round—for she was walking first, in her place, mine and Lucy's being at the rear—and said, coming to a standstill: "Girls, suppose we go down Dogfight Lane" (a narrow place, leading to the fair: dirty cottages on one side, trees and a ditch on the other) "just a little way, and have a peep, from the distance, at the pictures outside the shows? Can you all undertake to keep the secret, indoors? I'm sure there's no harm looking at shows half a mile off: and in that Plover Road

we shan't see a soul but the old cow in Ringfence Field, and our own shadows." Of course the schoolgirls would not have been schoolgirls had they said "No" to any mischief where a teacher led, and they went half frantic with delight, vowing, one and all, that the tortures of the Inquisition should not wring the secret from them—the said tortures having been the subject of their morning's theme.

Halfway down Dogfight Lane they came in view of the still-distant shows, and could have halted there and admired the painted scenes. But this did not satisfy them—one bite out of an apple rarely does any one—and on they went, down the lane, and burst right into the confusion of the fair. They visited the selling-stalls first, where some bought gingerbread; some unripe plums and rotten cherries; some —how humiliated I felt when I heard of it!—raffled for cakes, and shot at pincushions; some drank bottles of trash and fizz, called ginger-beer; and some bought fortune-telling cards; indeed, it is impossible to say what they did not buy. Then they went round to the shows to gaze at the pictures. Ugly booths decorated with play-acting scenery; dandy men in tight-fitting white garments, with red-paint eyebrows; harlequins turning summersaults, and laughing at their own coarse jokes; young women, in a meretricious costume of glazed calico and spangles, reaching no lower than their knees, who walked about with their arms akimbo, and waltzed with the harlequins! That a ladies' boarding-school should have been seen in front of anything so low-lived and demoralizing!

It was seven o'clock, and the performances were about to commence, drums were beating, fifes were piping, the companies were dancing, and the cries "Walk-up, ladies and gentlemen, we are just going to begin," were echoing above the din. The girls stood looking on at all this, longing to see further; for if the outside was so attractive, what must

the inside be? And—well, I must not reflect too harshly upon them: it is hard, especially for the young and light-hearted, to resist temptation. They went in—they really did: some into the "waxwork," and the rest into this theatre affair where the harlequins were. When they came to club their money together, it was found to be deficient, but the showmen took them for what they could muster. Very considerate of them! All particulars came out to me afterwards—or how could I have related this?—and I was ready to go out of my mind with vexation. But it was not their fault, it was Miss Powis's; and even now I have scarcely, I fear, excused her in my heart for her imprudence that night. But I do believe there is no act of deliberate disobedience but brings its own punishment, sooner or later. I have remarked it many times in the course of my life; and this did, with her.

Meanwhile, when my visitor departed, and I had been upstairs to see if Lucy wanted anything, I sat on at the sitting-room window, beginning to think the young ladies late, but concluding that the beauty of the summer night made them linger, when Sarah came in, and said Mrs. Nash wanted me.

Mrs. Nash was our boarder now. A lady had come after the departure of the Archers, and had remained five months with us, and now Mrs. Nash had succeeded her. She was a very grand lady in purse and dress. Her husband had made a mint of money at something in London, a retail shop we heard, but lately he had given it up, and bought mines, and they had recently taken a villa in our neighbourhood. Mr. Nash was in Cornwall, and his wife had taken our drawing-room and bedroom for a month, that she might be on the spot to superintend the fitting-up of her new house. She came to us on the same conditions that the Archers had done, having her own rooms and supplying

her own table. We found that it saved us trouble, and in the case of Mrs. Nash we preferred it, for she was certainly very far removed from a gentlewoman, and spoke very ungrammatically. So I went upstairs when Sarah said Mrs. Nash wanted to see me.

"Have the goodness to shut the door," she said, when I entered, without rising from her own seat, which I thought not very polite. She always spoke as if we were her inferiors, though in birth and education—— But that has nothing to do with the matter just now.

"I thought you might have liked the door open this warm evening," I civilly answered, turning back to close it.

"So I might, for it's close enough in this room," she rejoined; "but I've something to say that I don't want all the world to hear. Won't you sit down?"

I drew a chair forward, and sat down near her, waiting for her to continue.

"That servant of yours," she abruptly began—"I want to ask a few questions about her. Is she honest?"

"Honest? Sarah?" For I was too much surprised to say more.

"The question's plain enough," repeated Mrs. Nash, in impatient tones. "Have you never had no cause to doubt her honesty?"

"She is as honest as the day," I replied warmly. "She has been with us two years, and is above suspicion. I could trust the girl with untold gold."

"It's very odd," continued Mrs. Nash. "It was this day week—this is Friday, isn't it?—I came in from the villa, tired to death; for I had been standing over them painters and paperers, and telling 'em a bit of my mind about their laziness. I was as hungry as a hunter, besides, and after I had took off my things, I went down to the kitchen to see if Sarah was getting forward with my dinner.

She had the steak on the fire, and I went up and looked at the potatoes, for fear she should be doing 'em too much, for young ones is good for nothing when they are soft. That I had my pocket-handkerchief in my hand then I'll swear to, for I lifted the lid of the saucepan with it, and Sarah saw me ; but when I got back to the drawing-room here, it was gone."

"You may have put it on the kitchen table and forgotten it," I replied.

"That's just my own opinion, that I did leave it there. I came straight upstairs, and as I was coming in at this door, I put my hand in my pocket for my handkerchief, but no handkerchief was there. That teacher of yours was standing here, waiting for me : you had sent her up with a book. But she couldn't have touched it."

"Miss Powis ? Oh dear, no."

"Don't I say she couldn't ? She was at the end there, by the window, and I missed my handkerchief coming in at the door. I took the book from her, and she went down, and I after her."

"Did you go back to the kitchen ? Did you ask Sarah ?" I inquired.

"I went back at once, I tell you, following on Miss Powis's steps, and of course I asked Sarah ; and what first raised my suspicions against her was her saying she saw me put the handkerchief in my pocket as I left the kitchen. Now this could not have been the case, for if I had put it in my pocket at the bottom of the stairs, there it would have been when I got to the top, as I told her ; but she was as obstinate as a mule over it, and persisted, to my face, that I had put it in."

"I hope you will find it," I said. "It cannot be lost."

"I shan't find it now," she answered. "But it was a new handkerchief of fine cambric. I gave a great deal for it."

"Could you have intended to put it in your pocket, and let it slip on to the ground?" I suggested.

"I don't let things slip in that way," she tartly answered; "but, if I had, there it would have been, in the hall or on the stairs. Nobody had been there to pick it up in that minute, and both your teacher and myself can certify that it was not there. No! that servant has it."

"Indeed she has not, Mrs. Nash; I will be answerable for her. But why did you not tell me this at the time?"

"The notion came into my mind that I'd make no fuss but lay a trap for Sarah. So I have left handkerchiefs about these rooms since, and other things. I put a brooch in a corner of the floor on Monday, and last night I put a shilling under the hearth-rug, knowing she took it up every morning to shake."

"And the results?" I cried, feeling that I should blush to lay such "traps" for any one.

"I like my rights," responded Mrs. Nash, "and nobody will stand up in defence of their own sooner than I will; but to accuse a person without reason isn't in my nature. So I am free to confess that the baits I have laid about have been left untouched. The girl found and brought me the brooch, saying she supposed it had fallen from my dress; and this morning the shilling was laid on the mantel-piece."

"Yes, Sarah is strictly honest," I affirmed; "and wherever the handkerchief can have gone, she has not got it. Will you allow me to mention it to her?"

"Oh yes, if you like. And I'm sure, if between you my property can be brought to light, I shall be glad and rejoice over it."

"Fidgety, pompous old cat!" uttered Sarah, irreverently, when I went down and spoke to her. "She put the handkerchief into her pocket as she left the kitchen; I saw her cramming of it in with these two blessed eyes. She's been

and mislaid it somewhere; in her bedroom, I'll be bound, for the things lie about there at sixes and sevens. She'll find it, ma'am, when she's not looking for it, never fear."

"Sarah, what in the world can have become of the young ladies?"

"The young ladies!" echoed Sarah; "aren't they come in?" For the girl had been on an errand for Mrs. Nash, and did not know to the contrary.

"Indeed they are not."

"I'm sure I thought nothing but what they were in, and in bed. Why, ma'am, it's twenty minutes past nine!"

"Where can they be? What is Miss Powis thinking about?"

'There's that noise again!" uttered Sarah, banging down her kitchen window as the sound of drums and trumpets broke suddenly from the fair. "They are letting the folks out of the shows."

"Now! This is early to give over."

"Give over! Law bless you, ma'am! There's another repetition of the performance about to begin now: them tambourines and horns is to 'tice folks up. It won't be over till just upon eleven o'clock; as you'd know if you slept back."

It may have been ten minutes after that when we heard the side door open stealthily, and the young ladies come creeping in. I sprang towards them.

"What has been the matter? Where have you been?" I reiterated.

"We missed our way, and walked too far," answered a voice from amongst them, though whose it was I did not recognize then, and no one will own to it since.

"Very careless indeed, Miss Powis," I uttered; "very wrong. The young ladies must be tired to death, walking all this time, especially the little ones."

No one gave me any reply, and they all made for the staircase and bounded up it, Miss Powis after them, certainly not as though they were tired, more as though they wanted to get out of my sight. Young legs are indeed elastic, I thought to myself, little dreaming that those same legs had been at rest for the last two or three hours, the knees cramped between hard benches, and the feet buried in sawdust.

Several days passed on, and nothing occurred to arouse my suspicions about this fair escapade. On the Wednesday afternoon, our half-holiday, Mrs. Nash, in a fit of condescension, sent down an invitation for me, my sister, and Miss Powis to drink tea with her. As we could not all leave the girls, and we thought it might appear selfish if we went up ourselves and excluded Miss Powis (though she knew nothing of the invitation), Lucy said she would be the one to remain with the children.

A very good cup of tea Mrs. Nash gave us, and she entertained us with visions of her future greatness. The handsome fittings of her new villa, the servants they intended to keep, the new open carriage about to be purchased, and the extensive wardrobe she both had and meant to have.

"What do you think I gave for this?" she said, suddenly holding out her pocket-handkerchief. "Isn't it lovely: and I've a dozen of them."

"It is indeed a beautiful handkerchief," I said, examining its fine embroidery, and its trimming of broad Valenciennes lace. "It is unfit for common use."

"Yes, it is," answered Mrs. Nash. "But I used it at the horterculteral show yesterday, so thought I'd finish it up to-day. I gave eight and twenty shilling for that, at Swan and Edgar's, without the lace."

After tea, we took out our work. I proceeded to darn

a lace collar, which was beginning to drop into holes, and Miss Powis went on with her bead purse. Mrs. Nash said she could afford to put work out, and never did any. It happened that this collar had belonged to my mother, and we were comparing its lace, which was old point, with the Valenciennes round the handkerchief, when the bell rang, and Sarah came up and said a lady wanted me. So I laid my collar on the table, and went down to the sitting-room.

It was Mrs. Watkinson, who had come to pay the last quarter's bill for her niece's schooling. She sat talking some little time, and when she left I returned upstairs again, meeting on my way Miss Powis, who was running down them.

"I have worked up all my beads," she remarked to me in passing, "and am going to fetch some more."

Making some trifling answer, I entered the drawing-room. Mrs. Nash was standing at the window, watching two omnibuses which were galloping past.

"How them omnibuses do race one against another!" she exclaimed. "If I was a magistrate, I'd have every omnibus-driver in London before me, and put 'em into gaol in a body, endangering people's lives as they do! As soon as I have a carriage of my own, I shan't want to trouble 'em much, thank goodness."

I stood for a moment by her side, looking at the clouds of dust which the flying omnibuses raised behind them, and Mrs. Nash returned to her seat.

"Where's my handkerchief gone to?" she suddenly exclaimed.

I looked round. She was standing by the table, turning about all that was lying upon it—newspapers, my work, Miss Powis's work-box, and other things. No handkerchief was there; and then she looked about the room. "Where can it be?"

"Are you speaking of the handkerchief you were using?" I asked.

"Yes, I am. It was on the table near me, by your work; I'm sure of that. That makes two gone. What an odd thing!"

I quite laughed at her. "It cannot be gone," I said; "it is impossible."

"Well, where is it, then? It can't have sunk through the floor."

That was clear. "Perhaps you have left it in the bedroom," I suggested.

"I have not been in the bedroom," returned Mrs. Nash, angrily. "I have never stirred from my seat since tea, till I got up to look at them wicked omnibuses. As I turned from the window I put my hand in my pocket for my handkerchief and couldn't find it; then I remembered I had left it on the table, and I looked, and it wasn't there, and it wasn't on my chair, and it isn't anywhere—as you see, Miss Halliwell. One would say you had fairies in the house."

Just then Miss Powis returned. "What can I have done with my paper of beads?" she exclaimed, going up to her work-box and examining its contents. "Why, here they are, after all! How could I have overlooked them?"

"I have lost something worse than beads," interposed Mrs. Nash. "My beautiful handkerchief. It's spirited away somewhere.'

Miss Powis laughed. "It was lying on the table for ever so long," she said to Mrs. Nash. "You took it up and pressed it to your mouth, saying one of your lips was sore, and it was probably the salt from the shrimps you had taken at tea. After that, I think you put it in your pocket."

"Are you sure it is not in your pocket now?" I eagerly inquired of Mrs. Nash.

"Goodness save us; do you think I should say I hadn't the handkerchief if I had?" returned Mrs. Nash in a passion. "Look for yourselves." She whipped up her gown as she spoke—a handsome green satin, which she frequently wore—and displayed a white jean pocket resting on a corded petticoat. Rapidly emptying her pocket of its contents, she turned it inside out.

It certainly was not in her pocket, and she proceeded to shake her petticoats as if she were shaking for a wager. "It's not about me; I wish it was. Do you think either of you ladies can have put it into your pocket by mistake?"

"It is impossible that I can have done so," I answered; "because I was not in the room."

"And equally impossible for me," added Miss Powis; "for I was not on that side of the table, and could only have taken it by purposely reaching over for it." Nevertheless we both, following the example of Mrs. Nash, proceeded to turn out our pockets. No signs of the handkerchief.

A complete hunt ensued. I begged Mrs. Nash to sit still, called up Sarah, and we proceeded with the search. Mrs. Nash's bedroom was also submitted to the ordeal, but she protested that if found there, it must have flown through the keyhole. She offered the keys of her drawers, and of the cupboard—if we liked to look, she said—and was evidently very much put out, and as much puzzled as we were. Later in the evening Miss Powis retired to take the children to bed, and Lucy came in.

"Now what is your opinion of this little bit of mystery?" asked Mrs. Nash, looking at me.

"I cannot give one," I said; "I am unable to fathom it. It is to me perfectly unaccountable."

"Your suspicions don't yet point to the thief?"

"The thief! Oh, Mrs. Nash, pray do not distress me

by talking in that way. The handkerchief will come to light, it *must* come to light: I assure you Sarah is no thief."

"Oh, I don't suspect Sarah now," returned the lady. "It's a moral impossibility that she could have had anything to do with the business this evening, and I am sorry to have accused her to you before. You are on the wrong scent, Miss Halliwell."

I felt my face flush all over. Did she suspect ME?

"Ah, I see, light is dawning upon you," she added.

"Indeed, indeed it is not," I retorted warmly. "We have no thief in this house: we never have had one yet."

"Well, you are certainly as unsuspicious as a child," she said. "Who has it—has both—but Miss Powis?"

"Miss Powis!" I and Lucy uttered together. "Impossible!"

"We none of us have it—have we? the room has not got it—has it? it can't have vanished into the earth or soared up to the skies, and I suppose none of us ate it. Then who can have it, but Miss Powis? The thing is as plain as a pikestaff. What made her rush out of the room on a sudden, pretending to go for her beads, when they were here all the while?"

"Miss Powis is quite a gentlewoman; the family are thoroughly respectable, but reduced," broke in Lucy, indignantly. "She would be no more capable of this than we should be."

"Oh, bother family gentility!" retorted Mrs. Nash; "that doesn't fill young girls' pockets with pocket-money. I suppose she was hard up, and thought my handkerchiefs would help her to some."

I felt too vexed to speak. Lucy began a warm reply, but was interrupted by Mrs. Nash.

"I should like to know how she disposed of the first:

I'll stop her disposing of the last, for I'll have her up before the Lord Mayor to-morrow morning. This comes of her going gallivanting, as she did, to those shows at the fair."

"What a dreadful calumny!" uttered Lucy.

"She didn't only go herself, but she took all the school," coolly persisted Mrs. Nash, "and they never arrived home till half-past nine at night. You two ladies, for school-mistresses, are rather innocent as to what's going on around you."

A sharp recollection, bringing its own pain, flashed across me of the night when the young ladies terrified me by remaining out so late. *Could* they have been to the fair? I was unable to offer a word.

"Have some of the girls in, and ask 'em, if you don't believe me," continued Mrs. Nash. "Not Miss Powis; she'll deny it."

Lucy, full of indignant disbelief, flew upstairs, and brought down some of the elder girls: they had begun to undress, and had to apparel themselves again. I addressed them kindly, and begged them to speak the truth fearlessly: Did they go to the shows at the fair, or not?

A dead silence, and then a very long-drawn-out "Yes" from a faint voice. Lucy threw her hands up to her face: she was more excitable than I.

"That's right, children," cried Mrs. Nash: "never speak nothing but the truth, and then you'll not get into trouble. And if—goodness save us, they are beginning to cry! Why, you have nothing to be frightened at. There's no great harm in going to shows: I have gone to 'em myself, hundreds of times."

"And what did you see?" groaned Lucy. "Speak up. I insist upon knowing. Everything."

"Lady Jane Grey, in waxwork, going to execution, in a

black shroud and Protestant Prayer-book; and Henry the Eighth and his six wives, in white veils and silver fringe, one of them with a baby in three ostrich feathers; and the young Queen Victoria being crowned, with her hair let down, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, in a grey mitre and green whiskers, pouring oil on her—no, the mitre was green and the whiskers were grey; and Earl Rochester with a sword and an eye-glass, looking through it at Nell Gwynne; and King William in a pilot-coat, drinking coffee with the Queen Dowager; and Jane Shore in a white sheet, and—oh, dear! we can't recollect all," was the answer Lucy received, with a burst of sobs between every sentence.

"Oh, you unhappy children!" responded Lucy. "And did all of you go into this waxwork?"

"N—o. Some went into the theatre."

"The theatre! What did you see there?"

"A play—very beautiful. About a princess who wanted to marry somebody, and her father wanted her to marry somebody else, and she died right off on the stage for love, amongst the wax-lights."

"Wax-lights!" repeated Mrs. Nash, with a hearty laugh. "Why, you innocents! they were nothing but halfpenny dips. Was there plenty of dancing and singing?"

"Y—es. The dancers were from the opera in London, they said; stars, condescendingly come from there because the season was over."

And this made Mrs. Nash laugh again, but Lucy looked all the graver.

"Girls," I interposed, "I believe you have told me the truth: tell me a little more. How came you to go? Who proposed it, or induced you?"

"It was Miss Powis. She took us. Oh, indeed"—with a very genuine burst of sobs—"we should never have gone of ourselves."

"I told you so!" cried Mrs. Nash, triumphantly, as Lucy left the room with the children. "I heard of it the next day from one of the workmen at my villa, who was there and saw them. But of course it was no business of mine—till now."

CHAPTER XIX.

BEFORE THE MAGISTRATE.

THE scene in our house the following morning was beyond description. Mrs. Nash called in a policeman, and gave Miss Powis into custody for stealing her two handkerchiefs. The latter, in tears and the extreme of agitation, protested she had never touched either. There was an air of indignant truth about her, impossible, I thought, to be assumed. I am a great reader of countenances and manners, and have some penetration, and I thought I could have staked my life upon the girl's innocence. The policeman a little disenchanted me. "When you have had the experience we have, ma'am," he said, "you'll let assertions of innocence and aspects of truth go for what they are worth, and that's moonshine." Miss Powis offered the keys of her boxes, and insisted upon their being searched, and that her clothes should be examined. I thought she would have gone out of her senses, so great was her excitement, especially after her father arrived.

"Confess where the property is, and then I'll let you off," said Mrs. Nash, in answer to her impassioned appeals.

"I have not got it. I never had it. I swear it before Heaven!"

"Policeman, get a fly. We'll go up to the police court."

"Be ye merciful, even as your Father which is in heaven is merciful," broke in the pleading voice of Mr. Powis, a quiet gentlemanly man, with a sad amount of care in his

pale face. "I am sure, madam, my daughter is innocent: subject her not to this dreadful disgrace. The property may yet be found to have been mislaid."

"Moonshine, sir! as that policeman has just said about looks. Where can it have been mislaid to? up the chimney, or into the fire—when there was none in the grate?"

"I beseech you to show a little mercy. Give time. Think what your feelings would be if a child of your own were accused!"

"I never had no child, but one, and that died when it was only a week old," responded Mrs. Nash. "The fact is, sir, when young women have a propensity for dancing off to fair-shows and donkey-racing, it's no wonder if they help themselves to things not their own to pay for it."

"But Caroline has not been to such places!" uttered the astonished Mr. Powis.

"Hasn't she, though! Policeman, what are you standing there for, doing nothing? If you don't choose to get a fly, I'll call in some other officer."

We must have made a strange sight, driving away from our gate and up to London in that fly! Mrs. Nash, myself, Mr. Powis and his daughter inside, the latter sobbing hysterically, and the policeman on the box beside the driver. Mr. Powis had already offered to pay the value of the handkerchiefs, for which the magistrate afterwards accused him of a wish to compound a felony; and I am sure I would have paid it twice over, rather than have had such a scandal emanating from my house. But Mrs. Nash would not listen: she said she did not want the value, she wanted the property.

It appeared to me that the sitting magistrate was a great brute, or else that he was, that morning, in a dreadful temper. He is no longer a magistrate now, at least in this world, so it is of no consequence my recording my opinion.

I have no clear recollection of the scene now, and never had; I was too much bewildered and annoyed. I know that the court appeared to me a babel of staring eyes and confusion, and I felt thoroughly ashamed of being within it.

"What's your name?" growled the magistrate, when the case was called on.

"Caroline Frances Powis, sir," said her father.

"Can't she answer for herself, sir?" was the surly rejoinder. "Ever here before, officer?"

"No, your worship. Not unfavourably known. In fact, not known at all."

I need not give the particulars of the examination, having already mentioned the facts. I know I was called as evidence, and never knew afterwards how I gave it. I dare say the Court thought I was a great simpleton.

"Now, young woman," growled the magistrate, "what have you to say to this?"

She was a great deal too hysterical to say anything; and I must remark that his manner was enough to terrify the most innocent prisoner into an appearance of guilt. The old—I was going to write fool, but I'll put magistrate—committed her for trial. I thought I should have fainted when I heard it. And to have witnessed the graceless crowd assembled there bursting into a titter when it came out that our young ladies had gone to the shows on the sly! My cheeks tingle with the recollection now.

He said he would admit her to bail; and whilst Mr. Powis went out to get it, we were put into a dark, dirty room of the court—locked in, I dare say. After that—it seemed a long time—we rode home again, but Mrs. Nash was not with us then. People asked why I remained when the examination was over; but I could not find it in my heart to leave the poor thing alone; I should never have reconciled it to my conscience afterwards.

"She must go to your house, Mr. Powis," I whispered to him as the fly was nearing home; "I may not take her again to mine."

"You do not believe her guilty?" he rejoined.

I was puzzled what to answer. That morning I would have heartily said No; but the thought had been imperceptibly insinuating itself into my mind, in the atmosphere of that police court—if she did not take the handkerchiefs, where were they? That going to the fair had biassed my judgment; it had weighed heavily with the magistrate, and I saw it was beginning to do so with her father. Disobedience, as I told you, is sure to bring its own punishment. So she went to her father's home, and we procured another teacher.

Now, it was a strange thing, but some days afterwards Caroline Powis was attacked with measles. Perhaps she caught the disease in the court; I shall always think so, for we were brought into contact with sundry poverty-stricken, ghastly looking people, and there was not a single case of it in our neighbourhood. She had never had the disorder, and was extremely ill, the doctor, at one time, giving no hope of her. But she grew better, and when all danger of my carrying the infection to the school was past, I went to see her. She was lying in bed, looking thin and white, but a hectic flush spread over her cheeks when she saw me.

"I am sorry to see you here, my dear," I said; "I hoped you were up long since."

"I hope I shall never get up again," she eagerly answered; "I do not wish to. All the world believes me guilty."

"Not all the world," I said soothingly. Poor thing! Whether culpable or not, I was grieved to see her lying there so lonely and woebegone.

"Yes, they do. My father, my brothers and sisters, even

my mother, all believe it now. I am sure you do, Miss Halliwell. They harp so much upon my having gone to the shows, and say if I did the one I might have done the other. I hope I shall never get up from here again. And the thought of the trial terrifies me night and day. It comes over me as a dreadful nightmare, from which I try to escape and cannot; and then I scream with terror."

"That is true," Mrs. Powis said to me when we went downstairs. "If she suddenly wakes up in the night her terror is so great that I have to hasten from my room to soothe her. She asserts that she shall never leave her bed again, and I do not think she will. The dread of this disgrace, of standing in public to be tried as a common criminal, seems literally to be killing her by inches. Caroline was always so sensitive."

My recollection is not clear upon one point: whether she ought to have been tried before the long vacation, or whether the trial was originally fixed for after the assembling of the courts in November. I think the former, and that it was postponed on account of her illness. At any rate, November came in, and she had not been tried. Oh, those long, weary months to her! Poor girl!

The week of the trial came; it was to be on a Thursday, and on the previous Monday evening Mrs. Powis called at our house. It was quite late—had struck eight o'clock—and Lucy and I were just sitting down to our homely supper. I pressed her to take some. She would not, but accepted a glass of wine.

"Poor Caroline wants to see you, Miss Halliwell," she said to me. "She has been dwelling upon it many days past, but more than ever this afternoon."

"How is she?" I and Lucy eagerly asked.

"I think she is dying," was the answer. "I do not believe she will be alive on Thursday—the day she has so

much dreaded. Of course, the trial will be put off again, for she could not be moved from her bed to attend it."

The words shocked me greatly, and Lucy dropped her knife upon the plate, and chipped a piece out of it.

"To tell you the truth," continued poor Mrs. Powis, bursting into tears, "I have held back from asking you to come to us; but her urgency this evening has been so great, I could refuse no longer. I did so fear," she hesitated, dropping her voice to a whisper, "that she may be going to *confess* to you, as she thinks she is about to die; and to know that she has confessed her guilt would almost kill me. Though her father has been inclined to judge her harshly, I have unconsciously clung with hope to her constant assertions of innocence."

"Do you wish me to come to-night?"

"Oh no. I had a minute's leisure this evening, and so ran out. Come to-morrow, if that will suit you."

"But to be dying," interposed Lucy; "it seems so strange! What complaint has she? What is she dying of?"

"A galloping consumption, as the doctor says, and as I believe," answered Mrs. Powis. "My father went off in the same way, and my only sister. They were both well, and ill, and dead in two months, and—unlike her—had no grief to oppress them. Caroline might not have lived, even if this unhappy business had never occurred; the measles seemed to take such hold upon her constitution. Then I may tell her you will come, Miss Halliwell?"

"Yes, indeed. I will come as soon as I can, after morning school."

Mrs. Powis left, and I and Lucy sat over the fire, talking. "I would give something," she said, in a musing manner, "to know whether Caroline Powis was really guilty. I fear she was: but if it had not been for that show-going, to believe her guilty would have been more difficult."

"Lucy, she was certainly guilty. What else could have become of the pocket-handkerchiefs? And her conduct since this excessive prostration and grief, is scarcely consistent with conscious innocence."

May the angels, who heard that uncharitable opinion of mine, blot out its record! Cause of repentance for having uttered it came to me very shortly, proving how chary we ought to be in condemning others, even when appearances and report are against them. "*Who art thou that presumest to judge another?*"

After twelve the next morning, I put on my bonnet and shawl, and was going out at the door when Lucy ran up and called to me

"Hester, you may as well step into the dressmaker's, as you will pass her door," she said. "Ask her whether she means to let us have our new dresses home or not, and when. She has had them nearly a month, and never been to try them on."

Upon what trifling circumstances great events turn!

I went into the dressmaker's on my way. Her assistant and the two apprentices were in the workroom, but not herself.

"Miss Smith won't be two minutes, ma'am," said one of them; "she is only upstairs, trying on a lady's mantle. Or shall we give her any message?"

No; I determined to wait and see her myself, for I had sent her messages without end, and the dresses seemed none the nearer. She was always overwhelmed with work. So I sat down. One of the young women was busy with a green satin dress, unpicking the lining from the skirt. I knew it at once.

"Is not that Mrs. Nash's?" I asked.

"Yes, ma'am," answered the assistant. "She has got the bottom of the skirt jagged out and dirty, so we are

going to let it down from the top and take the bad in, and put in a new lining. There's plenty of satin turned in at the top—a good three inches. She says she always has her gowns made so. It's not a bad plan.

Miss Smith came in, and I was talking to her, when the young person who was unpicking the dress suddenly exclaimed: "My patience! what's this?"

We both turned. She was drawing something from between the lining and the satin skirt, and we all pressed round to look. *It was an embroidered handkerchief.*

"As sure as fate it is the one the rumpus was about!" uttered Miss Smith, in excitement; "the one poor Miss Powis was accused of stealing. What a providential coincidence, ma'am, that you stepped in, and were here to witness it!"

"Look if there's another," I said to the young girl; "there were two lost." And she bent down her face, and looked in between the lining and the dress.

"Here's something else," she said. "Yes, sure enough, it is another handkerchief. But this is a plain one."

It was even so. After months of agitation to many, and of more than agitation to Caroline Powis, the two lost handkerchiefs were brought to light in this mysterious manner. It appeared that the sewing of the pocket-hole, the thread which attached the lining to the satin, had come undone, and when Mrs. Nash had put, as she thought and intended, the handkerchiefs into her pocket, each had slipped down between the lining and the dress. The truth might have been detected earlier, but she had scarcely had the gown on since leaving my house: in its present "jagged" state, it was deemed too shabby for the splendours of the new villa.

When I went out at Miss Smith's door, I stopped and hesitated. Should I go to Caroline Powis, or should I go

to Mrs. Nash? That I would visit both I fully determined on. Better ease *her* mind first.

I was shocked at the alteration in her appearance when I entered her chamber—the attenuated features, their hectic flush, and the wandering eye. She struggled up in bed when she saw me.

"Oh, Miss Halliwell," she eagerly exclaimed, "I thought you were never coming! I am going to die—even the doctor admits that there is no hope. I have wanted to tell you, once again, that I am innocent of that dreadful thing—and you will not think I would utter anything but truth in dying."

"Dear child," I said, "I have news for you. Your innocence is proved to me, to your mother—for I have just told her; there she stands, sobbing with joy—and it will soon be proved to the whole neighbourhood. The handkerchiefs are found and you are exculpated. Providence, who is ever merciful, has brought the truth to light in His own mysterious way."

It affected her so much less than I had anticipated! There was no burst of excitement, no fainting, very little increase of the hectic flush. She sank back upon her pillow and clasped her hands upon her bosom. It may be that she was too near the portals of another world for the joys or sorrows of this one violently to affect her.

"I have had but one prayer whilst lying here," she whispered, at length: "that God would make manifest my innocence; if not before my death, after it. Dear mamma"—holding out her hand—"my father will not be ashamed of me now. And for the going to the shows—that surely may be forgiven me, for I have suffered deeply for it. Tell the truth to all the girls, Miss Halliwell."

When I went to Mrs. Nash's, which I did at once, that lady was seated in great state in her dining-room, eating

her luncheon, for she had taken to fashionable hours now. It was served on an elegant service of Worcester china, and consisted of pork chops and pickles, mashed potatoes, apple-tart and cheese, with wine and ale. She did not invite me to partake of it, which compliment I thought would have been only polite, as there was abundance. Not that I should have done so. But in her new grandeur, we schoolmistresses were deemed very far beneath her.

"Well," she said, "have you come about this bothering trial? Take a seat; there, by the fire if you like. I hear it is to be put off again."

"Put off for good, I think, Mrs. Nash."

"Put off for good! What do you mean? If the judges think to grant a reprieve or pardon, or whatever it's called, and so squash the affair before it comes on, my husband shall show 'em up in the courts for it. I'll make him. I don't say but what I'm sorry for the girl and her long illness, but then she shouldn't have been obstinate, and refused to confess. I can't help fancying, too, that the illness is part sham—a dodge to escape the trial altogether."

"You talk about her confessing, Mrs. Nash, but suppose she had nothing to confess, that she was really innocent: what else could she have done than deny it?"

"Suppose the world's made of soft soap," broke forth Mrs. Nash, scornfully. "How can you be such a gaby, Miss Halliwell? Why, you are almost as old as I am—oh, yes, you are! Not quite, may be; but when one dies from old age, the other will be quaking. If Caroline Powis did not steal the handkerchiefs, where did they go to, pray? Stuff!"

"They are found," I said.

She was carrying the tumbler of ale to her mouth, for she had continued her meal without heeding my presence, but she stared at me, and put it down untasted.

"The handkerchiefs are found, Mrs. Nash, and I have seen them."

"Where were they? Who found them? Who took them?" she asked, reiterating question upon question. "Has she given them up, thinking I'll let her off being tried?"

"Do you remember, that the day you lost the handkerchiefs you had on your green satin gown? Both days."

"Green satin gown! For all I know, I had. What has that to do with it?"

"They were unpicking the gown this morning at Miss Smith's, and inside the lining——"

"What are you going to tell me?" screamed Mrs. Nash, as though a foreshadowing of the truth had flashed upon her, whilst she threw down her knife and fork on the table, and pushed her chair away from it. "I declare you quite frighten me, with your satin gowns and your unpicking, and your long, mysterious face. Don't go and say I have accused the girl unjustly!"

"Between the lining and the dress they found the two handkerchiefs," I quietly proceeded. "They must have fallen in there, the hemming of the pocket-hole being unsewn, when you thought you were putting them into your pocket. Sarah persisted, if you remember, that she saw you putting the first in, a few minutes before you missed it."

I never saw such a countenance as hers at that moment. She turned as red as fire, and her mouth gradually opened and remained so. Presently she started up, speaking in much excitement.

"Come along, Miss Halliwell. I'll go to the dressmaker's, and have this out at once; confirmed or denied. Lawk-a-mercy! what reparation can I make to Caroline Powis?"

There was no reparation to be made. In vain Mrs. Nash

sent jellies and blancmanges and wings of chicken, and fiery port-wine to tempt the invalid back to life; in vain she drove daily up in her own carriage with her own liveried coachman ("Such an honour for the like of that little cottage of the Powises!" quoth the neighbours), and sat by Caroline's bedside, and made all sorts of magnificent promises to her, if she would only get well; in vain she sent Mr. Powis's landlord a cheque for the quarter's rent, hearing there was some little difficulty about its payment, for Caroline's illness had been expensive and had run away with all their ready money; and in vain she put the youngest child, a boy rising nine, into the Bluecoat School, through an influential butcher, who was a Common Councilman and very great in his own ward, and her husband's particular friend. Nothing recalled poor Caroline. "But don't grieve," she said to Mrs. Nash on the eve of her departure; "I am going to another and a better world." And she went to it.

Now, it is quite possible, and indeed probable, that Caroline Powis would have died whether this disgrace had fallen on her or not, for consumption, very rapid consumption, was hereditary in her family. But the effect the unpleasant circumstances had upon me was lasting, and I made a resolve that if I lost all the pocket-handkerchiefs I possessed in the world, and had not so much as a half one left for use, I would never prosecute any one for stealing them.

Should any one be inclined to question this little episode in my domestic experience, I can only say that it is strictly true, and occurred exactly as I have related it. If Mrs. Nash is indignant with me for telling it, though so many years have passed, and she still lives close by, I cannot help it, and I am under no obligation to her.

BOOK THE SEVENTH.

CHAPTER XX.

THE CLERGYMAN'S HOME.

A NUMBER of clergy were pouring out of the town of Chelsborough, for the Archdeacon had that day held a visitation in its cathedral. Some who were not pressed for time or funds had proceeded from the cathedral to one or other of the hotels to take up their quarters for the night, but by far the larger portion turned their way to their country homes. We must notice one, who set out to walk. He was of middle height and slender frame, with a look, not altogether of ill-health about him, but as if he had none too much superfluous strength. A walk of nine miles was before him, and the cold evening was drawing on. He glanced up at the skies dubiously. They threatened rain, and he was not well protected from it, if it came, for he was only in his black clothes and white neckcloth. He had a great-coat at home, but it was shabby; the seams were white, and there was a piece let in at one of the elbows, and it was darned under the arms, so he had not dared to put it on that morning, when he was going to mix with his brother clergy.

And now that Chelsborough was left behind and he was on the lonely road, where he was likely to meet few, if any,

observers, he drew off his black gloves, and, diving into a pocket of his coat, took out some bread-and-butter, wrapped in paper. He proceeded to eat it with the air of a man whose appetite is dainty or has passed. His had, for he had fasted since the morning; but he knew that to keep up his strength at all he must eat, and, failing good food, he must eat plain food. But the butter was salt and made him thirsty, and he felt giddy with his long confinement in the cold cathedral, and his limbs shrank from the walk before him.

"This will never do," he murmured, looking at his small stock of money, which proved to be eighteenpence. "I wonder if I could afford a glass of ale? To do so, I must change the sixpence."

He turned, with a sigh—for sixpences with him were not to be changed lightly—into a public-house which stood on the roadside. The landlady came forward from the bar.

"A glass of ale, if you please, Mrs. Finch, to fortify me for my walk."

"With pleasure, sir. Please step into the parlour. We have just got in some famous double stout; perhaps you would prefer a glass of that?"

The clergyman hesitated. He would have preferred the stout; it was a luxury he did not often taste; but he feared the price might be more than the ale. He could not for shame ask; the blush mantled in his pale cheek at the thought. So he said he would take ale, and the landlady brought it, and stood by gossiping whilst he drank it.

"You have a smart walk afore you, sir," she remarked, as he prepared to depart; "and I am afeared it will rain. You don't look over-strong to face it; not as hearty, sir, as when you was last by here, in the summer."

"I must put my best foot foremost."

"We shall soon be a-going to tea, sir, if you'd wait—if I

might make so bold as offer to send you a cup in here, with a bit of ham—a beauty we have in cut," resumed the kind-hearted landlady, scanning her visitor's slender form and knowing his slender income.

"Thank you," he interrupted; "you are very kind, but I must not spare the time; I must get on before the rain comes down. One of my parishioners is also dangerously ill, and on his account I must not delay. Good afternoon, Mrs. Finch; once more, thank you much."

He walked on, and had gained the fourth milestone when the rain began heavily. Some trees formed a shelter by the roadside, and he halted under them, the bent, twisted trunk of one affording a sort of seat. He removed his hat and rubbed his forehead with his handkerchief. It was a wide, expansive forehead, but the hair was wearing off the temples, as it often does with those who have a weight of thought or care upon them. The skies looked dark around, as if the rain had set in for the night, and the grey of the evening was coming on. He watched the rain gloomily enough. The prospect of soaking his new clothes was not a cheering one, for it was indeed hidden in the womb of time when he might be able to provide himself with another suit. But there was a darker fear still. Last winter, and the winter before, and for several previous winters, a suspicion of rheumatism had flown about him, and Jessup, the doctor, had warned him, not a week ago, that a good wetting might fix it on him. He could not fail being wet to the skin, if he walked five miles in that rain.

Just then the sound of wheels was heard, on the Chelsborough side, and the clergyman looked eagerly in the direction. Should it be any farmer in his gig who knew him, or a parishioner, they would give him a lift.

It was neither farmer nor parishioner. It was the

luxurious carriage of the Reverend Mr. Cockburn, his fellow-labourer at Chelson. He was being driven home from the visitation. He happened to be looking from the right-hand window as he passed—a stout, red-faced man—but he did not stop the carriage, or offer the vacant seat at his side. "He may not have seen me," murmured the poor clergyman to himself, as he gazed wistfully after the wheels of the fast-retreating chariot. "Though I did think, until to-day, that he would have invited me to go and return with him."

It sped out of sight, and he had nothing to do but watch the rain again. His thoughts reverted to the contrast in his position with that of the rich man who had driven by. Not always could he prevent their reverting to it. It was almost a case of Dives and Lazarus. Mr. Cockburn was rector of St. Paul's, one of the two churches at Chelson. The living was worth fourteen hundred a year, and he had also a private fortune. His table was luxurious, his servants were many, he had carriages and saddle-horses, he went out every summer for three months—it was necessary for his health, he represented to the Bishop of Chelsborough, and for that of Mrs. Cockburn—but when he was at home he took no trouble with his parish, all the hard work in it being turned over to his curate. *He*, the Reverend Alfred Halliwell, with his delicate wife and seven children, could find but a bare allowance of clothes and food, for St. Stephen's living, of which he was the incumbent, was not worth one hundred and fifty pounds, all told. He was a more eloquent man in the pulpit than he who had driven past, was a deeper theologian, had taken higher honours at the university; he was more active in parish labours than that gentleman and his curate put together; yet he could scarcely live, whilst Mr. Cockburn—— "I am getting into this dissatisfied

train of thought again," he meekly uttered. "Lord, keep me from it!"

There seemed to be no probability of the rain leaving off. Of course he could not remain under the trees all night, so he rose and walked on in it. Before he reached Chelson he was thoroughly wetted, and glad enough he was to see the lights of the town. It was dark then; and as he passed by the railings of a large house at the town entrance, the glare of light from the windows of its reception-rooms struck upon his eyes. Fires were blazing in both; the blinds being drawn down in one, but in the other he saw the cloth laid for dinner, and the rich wine in the decanters was glittering in the firelight. Involuntarily he halted to contemplate the picture of luxury and comfort, but at that moment the clocks rang out seven, and he hastened on. It was the residence of Mr. Cockburn.

A few minutes more brought him to the door of his own home—a newly erected, small red-brick house. He had been obliged to remove from the Vicarage, for the damp there had threatened to lay him up for life. His wife never had any health; his children were continually ailing; and at length Mr. Jessup said if they wished to live they must leave the Vicarage. So he took this house close by, which reduced his scanty income by two and twenty pounds.

He knocked at the door, and a troop of eager feet ran to it. His second and third children were girls of ten and nine: they wore soiled merino frocks and ragged pinafores. "Oh, papa!" exclaimed Emma, "how wet you are!"

He laid his hand fondly on as many heads as came within its reach, and went into the parlour. His wife was lying on the sofa, and the fire had gone out.

"Why, Mabel! No fire? I am drenched and shivering."

She rose up, pressing her temples. "You naughty children! How could you let the fire out? Why did you

not look to it? Oh, Alfred, I have had such a day with these boys! It is always the same: the moment you are gone they turn the house out of windows with uproar. I ceased to speak to them at last, and lay down with a pillow over my ears. My head is splitting!"

"Have you any tea?" inquired Mr. Halliwell, too familiar with these complaints to take much notice of them.

"I'm sure I don't know whether Betty kept the tea-pot. Annie, go and see."

"Papa," cried George, the eldest—a high-spirited boy of eleven—running in, "Betty says she has some warm dry things for you, for she guessed you would be wet. And she says you had better change them by the kitchen fire, and she'll put the young ones to bed the while."

He went shivering into the kitchen, thankful that there was a fire somewhere and some one to think of him. Betty, the prop and stay of the domestic house, was little altered, except in age, and her hair was more grey and untidy than ever. At the time of the vicar's marriage she had been discharged for a more stylish servant; but when things grew hard with them they were glad to take on old Betty and her worth again. Younger servants liked to dress finely, and were perpetually wanting their wages, which could not always conveniently be paid. Betty never asked for hers; and, let her fare as hard as she would, never complained of the food. She had her faults: does any one know a servant without them? Her chief one was a crabbed temper; Mrs. Halliwell called it "cross-grained." However, Betty was never cross-grained with her master: she held him in too high reverence.

"Why, master," she exclaimed, "if you are not dripping wet! Couldn't you borrow no umbrella, nor coat, nor nothing? Do, pray, make haste, sir, and get the things off."

"Papa," cried a sturdy young fellow, who had sat himself

down on the warm bricks before the kitchen fire, "do you know they have been to say——"

"Now, Master Tom, hold your tongue," interposed Betty, sharply. "Kiss your papa, and say good night, and I'll take you and some of the rest to bed. Sir, don't lose no time, for I know you must be catching cold."

"Good-night, Thomas," he said, stooping to kiss the child. "Stay: have you said you prayers?"

"Oh, I'll hear him his prayers," answered Betty, in tones that savoured somewhat of irreverence. "You get them things off, sir." Betty shut the door, and took Tom and three more upstairs to bed. She was not long over it: there was no time to be long over anything in that house. When she returned, the vicar had put on the warm clothes, and was arranging the wet ones.

"They have let the fire out in the parlour," she began. "I never did see such a house as this. If I don't have my eye over everything, it goes wrong. I took in a fresh box of coal, and told 'em to be sure and keep up a good fire for you: and missis lies down, and the others gets playing, and of course out it goes. Such a noise as there have been all day! enough to drive one crazy. Missis don't keep 'em in order one bit, and if I goes to do it, she's angry with me. Master, you'll have your tea by the fire here, won't you?"

"Is there any tea?" was the reply.

"Why, sir, don't you see the tea-pot on the trivet, a-staring you in the face? I made it after they had done theirs, so it have been stewing long enough. Did you think, sir, I had put it there empty, with nothing in it?"

He had not thought about it. His outer eyes had no doubt seen the tea-pot standing above the fire, but his mind was absent, and he could not have told whether it was a tea-pot or a saucepan, or, indeed, whether it was anything at all.

"I'll see to them, sir," cried Betty, whisking the wet clothes out of his hand; "you can't do no good with them." She then drew a small round table close to the fire, put a cup and saucer on it, with a little cold meat and some bread, and poured out the tea.

"Betty! that was what went out for your dinner," exclaimed Mrs. Halliwel', who had come into the kitchen, and sat down by her husband. "You must have eaten nothing."

"I ate enough," crossly responded Betty, who had an angry aversion to being reminded of her own acts of kindness. "Meat don't agree with me, and I have said so twenty times; I prefers potaters. I wish it had been more for master: he must want it bad enough, after his walk."

"I trust you have not taken cold, Alfred," said Mrs. Halliwell, in concerned tones. "Oh, did Betty tell you Stokes's servant came down just before you returned? He was worse, and asked for the Sacrament."

Up started Mr. Halliwell "I'll go at once," he said; "why did you not tell me?"

"Now, ma'am!" remonstrated Betty, "as if you could not have let him drink his tea in peace! I warned the children not to say anything till their papa was dry and comfortable; and they didn't, only Tom, and I stopped him. Sit still, sir, and finish your morsel of meat. Old Stokes ain't a-going off this minute; he ain't in such a mortal hurry as all that. You have plenty of time."

He thought not. He was ever most anxious to fulfil his duties, especially towards the poor and the sick; few clergymen had a deeper sense of their great responsibility in the sight of God. He swallowed the meat standing, gulped down the scalding tea, put on his old great-coat, and started off into the wet again.

The reader may glean that the Reverend Alfred Halliwell's

life was cast in a sea of perplexity, and so his sister Hester found it when she went to stay a week with them about this time. She had not been to Chelson since that first visit, twelve years ago, and had not seen Mabel since her marriage. All she could do, at first, was to look at her, for she had never seen so great an alteration in any one. Instead of two and thirty, she looked two and forty ; and her countenance wore a sad, unresisting expression, as if she could lie down under troubles, but never battle with them.

"It is the hard life I live," she said, in answer to a remark of Hester's ; "the constant anxiety, the worry and trouble of the children. Ah, Miss Halliwell ! do you remember begging me to consider the future well before I hastened to marry upon so small an income ? You told me that the daily crosses and privations, inseparable from a home of poverty, pressed more heavily upon the wife than upon the husband."

"I do remember it, Mabel."

"If I had only listened to you ! But mamma was most to blame. She must have known how difficult it was to exist upon such a living as Alfred's. I think they were all mad in those days."

"Who ?" asked Hester.

"The girls of Chelson and their mothers. From the moment Alfred was appointed here, they began to hunt him down, as dogs hunt a hare. Mamma kept me in the background because she wanted my elder sisters to marry first ; but I was led away by example and the popular mania, contrived meetings with the new clergyman for myself, and he chose me. Oh ! that it had been any of them, instead of me ! Not that I regret it, except in a pecuniary light. Alfred has been an excellent husband to me—one in ten thousand. But this wearing, hopeless poverty is enough to turn my brain."

"Mabel, I do think you might have managed a little better."

"I know I was a bad manager at first, but the best management will not stave off sickness; and it is sickness which has so pulled us down. The Vicarage was such a place to live in! You saw nothing of it; you were only there in the summer months: but in winter the damp positively ran down the walls. How the children were reared in it, I don't know; but I believe another winter in it would have done for Alfred. Once we were all down, except Alfred and Betty and one of the boys, with an infectious fever. I cannot tell the amount we owe Mr. Jessup."

"I am sorry to hear it," said Hester.

"It must be a great deal. He has never sent in his bill. I will say that every one has been most considerate to us. Alfred has given him small sums from time to time, as he could afford to do so. But with so many children to clothe and feed, what can be spared out of two pounds a week?"

"You have more than that, Mabel."

"Very little, I can assure you. In the first year or two of our marriage we got into debt; and yet I strove to be contriving and economical. But I suppose I had not the ability; I was so inexperienced; and we began life more as I had been accustomed to live at my mother's. People were free enough to blame us, I heard; but I declare that we had no wrong intention: it seemed that the more we strove to save, the deeper into debt we fell. My illnesses were expensive, and they came on so rapidly; and I had the misfortune at those times of having a selfish nurse and an extravagant servant, who managed the housekeeping between them, and pretty bills came in! Then we had bought some furniture on our marriage, and that debt embarrassed us. So Alfred came to the resolution of borrowing a few hundreds——"

"It was the worst resolution he could have come to," interrupted Hester.

"Well, he did it. But we believed that at papa's death we should be able to pay off everything, and be beforehand with the world. But when poor papa did die, we found there was nothing: mamma even was left badly off. So, ever since, we have been struggling to pay off this money: a little one year and a little another, besides the interest. Oh, Hester, I am weary of life! The same cares, the same pinching, from year's end to year's end. Matilda has never forgiven me for marrying Alfred; for she counted on having him herself; but she is much better off than I am, for she is out as nursery governess, and gets thirty pounds a year. Girls are so eager to be married; but they would be less so if they could take a peep into the mirror of the future. 'Marry in haste, and repent at leisure.' There is no truer proverb."

The children now began to come into the room. Hester had seen the elder ones the previous night, but the rest had gone to bed when she arrived.

"What is the matter with this one?" she hastily exclaimed, as a sickly-looking little thing limped in behind the rest.

"That is David," said Mrs. Halliwell. "We fear he was thrown down; for, when about two years old, he suddenly grew lame, and then abscesses formed. He is never without them. But his health does not seem to suffer: and he has a large appetite."

The child looked up at Hester, with his wan face and his dreamy brown eyes, betraying so much mind. He gave a faint cry when she took him on her knee.

"Do I hurt you, my little boy?"

"It always hurts me," he answered. "Not much."

"Now, children," said their mamma, "run into the kitchen. You are to have your breakfast there this morning.

Sam, don't look so gloomy; Betty has some treacle for you."

"Oh," shouted Sam, "that's famous!" And he rushed off, followed by the others. Hester kept David on her knee.

"Let him go with the rest, Hester," said Mrs. Halliwell. "If he remains here he will be wanting the eggs. Betty is boiling three for us."

"Oh, Mabel! if he does!" she involuntarily exclaimed. "How can you begrudge an egg to this sickly child?"

Mabel looked at her sister-in-law until the tears stood in her eyes. "Begrudge it! I would *sell* myself to procure proper food for my children, but if it cannot be procured, what am I to do? We had these eggs in, because you were coming, and we could not put one on the table for you, and go without ourselves; it would make our poverty too conspicuous. You see, you are making me betray the secrets of our prison-house," she added, with a bad attempt at merriment.

"I really beg your pardon, Mabel. I spoke without reflection."

"You only spoke as others would have spoken—all who possess not my bitter experience. It is a shame," resumed Mrs. Halliwell, in tones of deep indignation, "that the Church of England should pay her ministers so badly! Its glaring contrasts are enough to sicken one of religion, as relating to the Establishment. Who can wonder that we have so many Dissenters? Look no further than this town: the one church giving its clergyman fourteen hundred a year, the other only one hundred and fifty: and the worst paid has the most to do—more than double that of the other. Why should not these livings be rendered more equal?"

"I suppose it could not be done, under the present system," said Hester.

"Then the system should be changed," returned Mrs. Halliwell. "It is a crying sin, Hester, that a gentleman who has dedicated his life to the service of the Church should be paid less than a common mechanic. Alfred makes me wild, because he takes things so patiently. I know he feels them, but he never complains or murmurs; and when I break out, which I can't help doing sometimes, he goes on in his mild, stupid, uncomplaining way, about *bearing* one's cross in patient silence. I can't, and I don't try to."

"Where is he?" inquired Hester, thinking it might be as well, just then, not to argue the point. "Not up yet?"

"Don't you know? He is at church, reading prayers. That is the reason we are waiting breakfast. Nothing would satisfy some of the people but they must have a daily service at eight o'clock; so the two churches take it alternately, two months each, and Alfred's turn is on at present. He is worked nearly off his legs. This is a straggling parish, with many poor, and always some sick. Then there are the schools to attend to, and the different charity clubs and meetings, and the service on the saints' days; and, if you please, the church has now to be opened twice a week, from eleven till twelve, and Alfred has to stick himself there, in case any baptisms or churchings come in. A parcel of rubbish!"

Hester could not help laughing, Mrs. Halliwell brought out the last sentence with such intense indignation.

"Well, I have cause to say it," she went on. "If they work Alfred so much, they ought to pay him better. He had two pupils who were reading with him, and their pay helped him a great deal; but when they put on all these new-fashioned duties, he was compelled to give them up. It is a wicked shame."

Just then Mr. Halliwell returned, and Betty entered

with the coffee-pot and the three eggs. She then went round to take up David. He was unwilling to go, and clung to Hester.

"Ah, that's because he has seen the eggs here," cried Mrs. Halliwell.

"I have cooked him one," interposed Betty. "I talked to old Knight at the shop last night, till he gave me one into the shilling's worth, so I have boiled it for him. Missis have got her number all the same, I thought, and it will do Davy no harm. Come along, Master Davy."

It was Wednesday, Mr. Halliwell's day for going to the church, and he left at eleven o'clock. After that, Mrs. Halliwell came down with her things on. Little David had gone to Hester again, and she had him on her knee.

"I am obliged to go out on some business," she said. "I am sorry to leave you."

"Oh, I shall amuse myself very well, talking to Davy. Where are the children ?"

"Their father has set them to their lessons. Their education gets on very badly, Alfred is obliged to be out so much. If you hear them making a noise, just go and give it them, please. They are in the next room. Betty has the young one with her."

Mrs. Halliwell departed, and Hester and Davy sat making acquaintance with each other, till Betty went into the room with a full box of coal. She stumbled over a stool that stood in the way, and several lumps rolled on the worn-out old carpet.

"Now then ! bother the stool ! Them children's always a-leaving something in the way. Our eyes don't get no younger ma'am, nor we neither."

"No, that we don't, Betty. But you seem to be as active and well as ever."

"There's no chance to be otherwise here. Sometimes I threatens to leave it; but that's when I'm cross."

"Where have you left the little one, Betty?"

"Oh, I've stuck him up to the kitchen table, and tied him in a chair, with a tin baking-dish afore him, and an old iron spoon. That's what I always does with him when I'm busy; and he knocks away there for an hour and thinks it's music. How do you thinks master's looking, ma'am?"

"Pretty well, Betty. He was never over-strong in appearance. I think your mistress looks extremely ill."

"Missis has a deal to do, and she don't get good things enough to keep up her strength. Do you know where she's gone now?"

"No."

"She is gone out to give a music lesson. She has took to teaching the pianor."

"Teaching the piano!" uttered Hester.

"I don't know as I ought to have told," proceeded Betty, "for missis ain't fond of having it spoke of. Not that she cares, herself; but them Zinks gives themselves such airs. When they first heered of it, they came here, and made such an uproar as never was. Old Mother Zink—— Ma'am," broke off Betty, "I hope you will excuse me, but I can't abide that old lady. She was a-pushing all her daughters at the head of master, in those old times, and she got her will and snapped him up for one of 'em, and now she comes here, a-turning up her nose, and says he doesn't pervide her daughter with things suitable to her station! Well, when things was at a low ebb with us, last autumn, missis pockets her pride, and begins to teach the pianor—which she has a great talent for music, folks say—and I think that little 'un, Archie, will have it too, if it goes by noise: hark at the rattle he's making."

Hester listened, and laughed.

"Well, ma'am, Mrs. Zink and Miss Fanny goes on at her as if it was a crime. But missis is wiser than to give in to 'em: the money's too useful. She has six pupils, and they pays her a pound a quarter apiece, which makes four and twenty pound in the year. If it hadn't been for that, ma'am, I don't think they could have kept me on this winter. Though I stops for a'most nothing; just a pair of shoes now and then, for I can't go barefoot."

"Then your mistress does do something, Betty, to aid matters?"

"She does her share, what with one thing and another; she ain't idle. There's the making new things for the children, when they gets any; and the patching of the old, which never fails, for one must turn 'em out decent to church on a Sunday, a little like gentlefolk's children; and the ironing the fine things, which is above my rough hands; and the pies, which is above 'em too; and the giving these pianor lessons; and the nursing Davy and little Archie, who both cries to be took up, and I have not always got the time; besides her visits round the parish. What with it all, missis don't sit upon a bed of lavender, with folded hands, and do nothing but enjoy the smell. My heart!" added Betty, in a different tone, "if here ain't Mrs. Zink!"

She went away to open the door, and Mrs. Zink entered with her daughter Fanny. Both were thinner, and Mrs. Zink had taken to wearing false hair; but otherwise they were little altered.

"Mrs. Halliwell has just gone out," said Hester, when they had sat down.

"Ah!" grunted Mrs. Zink, "she has turned herself into a professional. What do you think of her so disgracing her family? I never heard of such a lowering proceeding for a clergyman's wife."

"Money is so much wanted here," rejoined Hester.

"You need not tell me that," retorted Mrs. Zink; "you don't know it as well as I do. I should just think money is wanted."

"What a lesson this house ought to be to us against getting married!" ejaculated Fanny Zink, lifting her eyes and hands.

"Yes," answered Hester, "unless we see our future more clearly before us than Alfred and Mabel did. I don't wonder at Mrs. Halliwell's giving music lessons. She does it from a praiseworthy motive."

"I don't know about the motive," wrathfully interrupted Mrs. Zink. "She ought to know better. If it were Fanny, now, who gave a little private instruction, it might be excused. Young—that is, unmarried—ladies often do such things for the sake of pocket-money. But Mabel is a clergyman's wife, and bound to keep up her dignity. As to her husband's permitting it, I cannot find words to express my indignation. He deserves to be tarred and feathered, as they serve the missionaries in those heathen settlements."

"Here he comes," remarked Hester, seeing her brother's approach from the window.

"Then, Fanny, we will go," said Mrs. Zink, rising hastily. "I don't care to come across him, Miss Halliwell, when my temper's up. One gets no satisfaction reproaching him; and it puts me out of sorts for the rest of the day. Let me reproach him as I will, he keeps on that provoking meekness—wanting to reason, instead of quarrel. If I struck him, I expect it would be all the same. I never saw such an insensible man."

"Oh no, Mrs. Zink, you are mistaken," replied Hester. "Mr. Halliwell is not insensible."

"Then he carries his 'Christian feeling,' as some folk call it, very far. Into affectation, and nothing less. You must

come and drink tea with us one of these first afternoons, my dear."

"Thank you. If I have time. I shall not be here long."

"Ah! one has nothing but trouble in this world. There's Amy must come home now, for she has no other left. Good day, my dear."

Mr. Halliwell came in, shivering and looking blue. "It is very cold, Hester," he remarked, as he leaned over the fire. "And the church felt so damp to-day."

"Had you anything to do? Any christenings or churchings?"

"No. I generally remain there the hour for nothing. The poor like to choose Sunday: it is their leisure day; and other people always give me notice."

"How is it, Alfred, you have three full services on the Sunday now, as I hear you have?" she inquired. "You used to hold them only morning and evening."

"Yes; but one cannot please everybody. A few people wanted the evening service changed to the afternoon, but most of the parishioners were against it, and the malcontents appealed to the Bishop of Chelsborough. He decided that, according to the rubric, it must be held in the afternoon, and he gave me the orders accordingly. But I was unwilling to forego the evening service; I thought I ought not to do so: it is always so fully attended; so I kept it on. In the afternoon we never muster more than forty or fifty; people don't like coming out immediately after dinner."

"How tired you must be when Sunday night comes!"

"Tolerably exhausted. Sometimes I feel as if I could go to bed and never get up again."

"Alfred, yours is a hard life."

"Do not set me against it," he returned; and his tones were, for the moment, so impassioned that, had Mrs. Zink heard it, she never hereafter would have accused him of

want of feeling. "I know that it must be good for me, or it would not be inflicted: and I know that I am being borne up in it, for, of my own strength, I never could *do* and *go through*. When a repining spirit steals over me, I compare my condition with that of others less fortunate than myself: there are numbers so, even of my own calling. There is a poor curate in a rural parish—Camley, three miles off—a most deserving man. He has only seventy pounds a-year, a wife, a mother, and eight young children, all to be supported out of it: and he is expected, out of this, to give away to the poor, as I have to do. I have seen him on a week-day with scarcely a shoe to his feet. Hester, when I feel inclined to murmur, I think of him, and am thankful."

He was preparing to leave the room to hear the children's lessons—not that many could have been learnt, from the outrageous noise they had kept up—when Betty burst into it, nearly running against him. "Master! master!" she exclaimed, "here's Mr. Cockburn's footman without his hat, and all his hair standing on end. He says his master's took in a fit, and Mrs. Cockburn says will you go up?"

Mr. Halliwell hastened out, and Hester was again alone. At one o'clock Mrs. Halliwell came in.

"They are saying in the town that Mr. Cockburn is dead," she exclaimed. "How fearfully sudden!"

"And like enough it is so," added Betty, "for St. Paul's bell is a-tolling out."

All doubt was over when the vicar returned. Mr. Cockburn had been found on the floor of his study in a fit of apoplexy. Remedies failed to arouse him, and in a short time he was gone.

"Oh, Hester!" murmured her brother, deeply affected, "I have envied him in life. But better toil on as I do, than be surprised thus suddenly, in my ease, and taken before my Maker—perhaps unprepared."

CHAPTER XXI.

A SECRET BARGAIN.

A FEELING arose in Chelson in favour of Mr. Halliwell, that he might have the vacant living; and a petition was got up, unknown to him, praying for it. His own parishioners said they should be grieved to lose him, but would support it for his own sake. After a few days it came to the vicar's ears. He would not allow himself to hope, or dwell upon the change of prospect, and shook his head at the bare notion of being suddenly exalted to fourteen hundred a year. "I might grow proud," he said; "I might forget to be humble; though it would be welcome for the sake of educating my children."

Not so said Mabel. She was in high spirits, and lost herself in momentary visions of having already effected the desired change. "The rectory is such a capital house, Hester," she would say; "and, oh, what a blessed relief it will be from our life of labour! Whatever shall we do with old Betty? She would be out of place there. Pension her off?"

"Make her major-domo over the rest," laughed Hester.

It was Mr. Halliwell who buried the deceased rector. The curate of St. Paul's was the Reverend George Dewisson, a young man very unpopular in the parish. He was a brother of that Miss Dewisson who had formerly set

her cap so strenuously at Alfred Halliwell. When a suggestion was made that perhaps he, George Dewisson, might be the newly appointed rector, Chelson was up in arms. He was an austere man of uncertain temper, never cordial with any one and harsh to the poor, a bad reader, and it was well known that he bought his sermons. St. Paul's protested it would not have him; it had had quite enough of him as curate.

"Are you acquainted with the gentleman who has the living in his gift," inquired Hester of her brother—"this Mr. Burnley?"

"Mr. Burnley is only the steward," he replied. "The living is in the gift of Lord Seaford."

Lord Seaford! Hester was thunderstruck at the answer. With reference to the living, she had never heard any name mentioned but Mr. Burnley's.

"I had no idea the Seafords possessed property in this part of the country," she said, almost doubting the information.

"Lord Seaford bought it some time ago from Lord Westnor, who ruined himself gambling, and joined his son in cutting off the entail. I should think ill-luck goes with the property," added Mr. Halliwell; "for Seaford, they say, will be obliged to sell it again. His sons have all turned out wild; but Lord Sale the most so. He has nearly ruined his father."

"Is Lord Seaford ever here?"

"He is here now—so I heard yesterday; but he lives chiefly abroad. Too poor, now, to live in England."

Hester Halliwell was not given to wild schemes, but one was coming into her brain then. That she would find her way to Lord Seaford, recall herself to his recollection, and boldly ask him to give the living to her brother: ask for it *in recompense*, if other persuasions failed, for the injury

inflicted on her by Lady Georgina. Aye, in such a cause, she would not mind telling him that.

"Alfred," she said, "do you know what I am thinking of? That I will go to Lord Seaford, and ask him to give you the living."

"Well done, Hester!" returned Mr. Halliwell, the ingenuous colour flushing his pale cheeks at the words. "What presumptuous thing will you do next?"

"If the worst comes to the worst, and I get a refusal, you will only be where you are now. I can urge the wishes of Chelson as a plea for my request."

The following day found Hester at Hawsford, Lord Seaford's seat. She had engaged a fly to take her, for it was six miles off; but she arrived at last. They were some time answering the summons, and then the door was unlocked and unbarred.

"Curious they should lock up the house," thought Hester, "if Lord Seaford is here."

A woman appeared, looking like a housekeeper. "I wish to see Lord Seaford," said Hester.

"His lordship is gone, ma'am. He left late last night."

It was a terrible disappointment! All her hope fell to the ground. And she had had the expense of the fly for nothing!

"But if it is any business, ma'am, his steward, Mr. Burnley, lives in the village close by. My lord leaves most things to him."

As Hester was there, she thought she might as well see the steward, though she could not urge the matter upon him as she would have done on Lord Seaford. Mr. Burnley's house was the only good house in the village, as far as she saw; and she was handed into the office. It was one of two rooms opening into each other, with a separate door to each leading into the passage of the house. It was

the back room that she was shown into ; and Mr. Burnley, a man of gentlemanly manners, went to her from the front one, through the intervening door, which he pushed to but did not close.

He was very polite. Regretted his inability to comply with her request, for he respected much the merits of the Rev. Mr. Halliwell. Lord Seaford had received the petition in his favour most graciously, and would have been delighted to comply with its prayer had the living not been promised.

"Is it really promised ?" asked Hester, wistfully.

"I may say it is given," replied Mr. Burnley. "The new rector will be announced to-morrow."

Of course there was no more to be urged, and Hester left the room. Mr. Burnley followed, to attend her to the door, but a young man encountered them in the passage, apparently in a pressing hurry, seized Mr. Burnley by the button-hole, and took him back into the room. So Hester said "Good-day," and went on alone. At that very moment the street-door was pushed open, and, scraping his shoes outside, she saw old Mr. Dewisson, the father of the late Mr. Cockburn's curate. He was a lawyer and electioneering agent in Chelson, seventy years of age, but as active as a boy, with a rosy, clear complexion, and snow-white hair. Hester did not care that he should see her, and go back and tell Chelson that she had been personally soliciting for her brother—and her business he would not fail to guess—so, on the impulse of the moment, she glided in at the open door of the front office, until he should have passed.

She heard him enter and wipe his shoes upon the mat, and she then heard the young man come out of the back office, and leave the house. Mr. Burnley also came out of it, and shook hands with Mr. Dewisson in the passage.

"I have been expecting you this hour," he said.

"Better late than never," answered the old lawyer. "I had some business to attend to before I could get away. Lord Seaford left last night, I suppose?"

"Yes. He is ploughing the waves to France by this time, if he could catch the morning's mail to Dover. Walk in."

To Hester's great horror—it is as fresh upon her now as it felt then—the door she had just slipped in at was pulled sharply to, of course by Mr. Burnley, and the key turned in it. So she was locked in. What to do she did not know. She looked at the window, and had a momentary thought of getting out of it, but found that she would pitch upon spikes. Next came a wild idea of trying the chimney; but even if she reached the top and the roof, how was she to get down? So she had to remain where she was, trusting to chance, and to some one unlocking the door, and sat there shaking and shivering. As to going into the back office and avowing herself to Mr. Burnley in the face of old Dewisson, she would rather have risked the spikes.

She did not hear what was said at first in the next room, and tried not to hear the rest, but there was no avoiding it; for the voices, lowered in the commencement to the confidential tones associated with the telling of state secrets, were gradually raised.

"How much do you say is to be kept back?" were the first distinct words, in Mr. Dewisson's voice.

"A thousand," answered Mr. Burnley.

"Which will leave my son four hundred a year. That's less than I suggested. There's nothing very great about that."

"But there is about fourteen hundred. Under any circumstances but these he might whistle for so rich a living. You know, Dewisson, that you have no interest to get him one of half the value. He might starve out his life upon

a pittance, as poor Halliwell does. You are aware of the petition that came in ?"

"Aware of it ! Chelson's full of it. Thinks it's going to succeed. I say, Burnley, though, Lord Seaford's is not a bad life."

"He is sixty-six, and knows something of dissipation still. He may fill his years, three-score-and-ten ; he will not go much beyond them. And then your son comes into the full income."

"And then George comes into the full income," slowly repeated Mr. Dewisson. "Well, it is a good day's work for both Lord Seaford and him : each gets his turn served. But I say, Burnley, what will the parish think of George ? They'll call him a miser. Holding a living of fourteen hundred a-year, and living up to four of it !"

"Oh—he gives the surplus to the poor, you know."

They both laughed, and Hester thought, by the sound, seemed to be rising. She shook excessively as they came down the passage.

"Burnley," cried Mr. Dewisson, in passing the door, "we must meet to celebrate this : when will you come and dine with me ?"

She did not hear the answer ; they had reached the front door, and the voices escaped her. Mr. Burnley returned, unlocked the door as he passed and unlatched it. Hester squeezed herself up to nothing, in her terror, and her heart stood still.

He did not enter : she is thankful for it yet ; but went on to the back office, and shut himself in. Not another moment waited Hester. She turned into the passage, noiselessly opened the front door, and flew down the street towards the inn where the flyman was in waiting, as if a ghost had been after her. Mr. Dewisson and his gig were already at a distance.

Now the reader may doubt whether this incident really occurred to Hester Halliwell. *It did:* the conversation has been related word for word as it is given; and George Dewisson still holds his living.

Hester had leisure to think over what she had been a witness to as she drove back to Chelson; and, to her, the bargain appeared to be a sinful one. When the fly stopped at its destination, Mrs. Halliwell's face, full of joyous hope, appeared above the window-blind, and the children came dancing out. Her brother looked up from his warm arm-chair when she went in.

"Hester!" cried Mabel, in her hasty way, "you don't speak."

"Perhaps I had better not speak; for I have only bad news to give you."

"Let us know the worst at once," she cried. "We must know it shortly, anyway."

"Lord Seaford has left Hawsford. He left last night for France, and the living is given away."

"Given away!"

"Yes. I saw the steward."

"To whom?" asked her brother.

"He did not say," was Hester's answer. For not even to him would she breathe a hint of the dishonourable secret she had (so to say) dishonourably heard. "But not to you."

Mabel sank down on a chair, poor thing, and despair, if ever Hester saw it, settled itself on her face. She had buoyed up her hopes unreasonably. "Toil! and trouble! and illness! and heart-burning! and care!" she murmured. "Must it go on with us for ever?"

Her husband's countenance had fallen, and a red spot, the symbol of raised expectancy, shone on his cheek, proving that he *had* hoped for success. For one moment he bowed

his head upon his hands ; the next, he rose and spoke, his voice calm as usual, and his face pale again.

"It is the will of God, Mabel, that we should still bear our cross. Let us welcome it."

"If such a meek-spirited temper is not enough to try the patience of Job ! " impetuously muttered Mrs. Halliwell.

The following day the new rector was announced—the Reverend George Dewisson. St. Paul's rebelled, so far as words could go ; but there was no remedy, and they had to sit down and put up with him. Amy Zink came in to tea that evening, the last of Hester's stay. The old aunt was dead, so Amy had returned to her mother's. Hester looked at her with interest : a meek, gentle-spirited creature, who seemed, as Mabel afterwards expressed it, to have been "kept under."

"Amy," her sister said to her, "it is a great shame old aunt left you nothing."

"She gave me fifty pounds the day before she died," responded Amy. "For mourning, she said. Of course I have not spent it. I made some old do, and gave the money to mamma."

"To mamma ! Then you'll never see it again ! " cried Mabel. "I should have put it in my pocket. Aunt ought to have left you a sufficient income."

"She said her nephew Braybrook had more claim upon her than I."

"That's nonsense," returned Mabel. "He can't have. You have worn out your best years, bearing with her fractiousness. You don't know how necessary money is."

"I think I do," answered Amy. "Mamma has been asking me, ever since I came home, how I am to be kept."

"And she'll ask you that every day of your life, Amy ; so prepare for it. I wish I could afford to have you here, you would be so useful."

It happened that Hester went upstairs in the course of the evening to fetch something wanted for the children. She was looking for it when a timid, humble voice was heard behind her.

"Miss Halliwell, may I speak to you?"

"Is it you, Amy? Yes, of course. What is it?"

"I do not think that I ought to remain at home," said Amy, with a very vivid blush. "Mamma says everything is so dear, and—and—I don't like to hear her say it. It does make me feel so uncomfortable."

"Yes?" rejoined Hester.

"I was thinking that perhaps you might want a teacher in your school: or might know of some other school wanting one. I should be so thankful to come to you. Indeed, I would not presume upon Mabel's being related to you, in the way of expecting to sit with you after school hours. I would be quite humble, and be content to be the lowest of all your teachers, and sit by myself without fire—or anything. If you could only try me!"

Hester wondered. Had she been used to "sitting without fire?" "We are not in want of a teacher just now," she answered, in kindly tones; "our vacancies are all filled. Are you"—she spoke hesitatingly—"qualified for a teacher?"

"I am a thorough English scholar," returned Amy; "I understand the globes, and am a good arithmetician, and have the grammar by heart; but I am not accomplished; I cannot play on any instrument. Aunt said she knew I should be stupid at it, and would not let me learn. I can teach everything in sewing, plain work and fancy work, and the most delicate embroidery; and I could be useful in the kitchen, if you wanted me, especially in cooking for the sick. I can draw a little: my aunt let me learn for a year when I was fifteen."

Hester smiled. "You would have patience with young children, I should think?"

"Indeed, yes," replied Amy. "I have much patience naturally, and living with my aunt has given me more, for she was extremely irritable. No one else would stay with her—not a servant; they would not come near the room. I would strive to do my very best, Miss Halliwell. And I would not ask for any salary: not for a year or two, until my clothes begin to wear out. I have a good wardrobe at present."

"I will bear you in remembrance, Amy," was Hester's promise. And she did so.

Hester returned home, and the school duties went on as usual at Halliwell House. It was a flourishing establishment now; at least, sufficiently so to remove anxiety and obviate the necessity of letting their drawing-room. Not long after this they were to receive a surprise—no less than a visit from Mrs. Pepper. She arrived at their house with two children: Jessie, an infant, and Thomas, a lad some years older. Of Mrs. Pepper's large family these were all that remained. Several had died older than Thomas, and some between him and his sister. Two servants attended her: a man and a coloured nurse. She was strangely altered; not the slightest trace remained of the once young and pretty Jane Halliwell. Hester would look at her by the hour, unable to trace a single feature. She was in an extremely precarious state of health, and a conviction stole over Hester that she had only come home to die.

Tom was the romp of the schoolroom, and was always escaping bounds and rushing into it, to the excessive delight of the young ladies. He was a round-faced, chubby urchin, wonderfully demure before his mamma and aunts, but a very demon of mischief elsewhere.

"Jane, you ought to have come home years ago," exclaimed Hester to her sister. "It was really wicked of you so to neglect yourself."

"I did so dread the voyage alone, and Major Pepper never could obtain leave. He is a very useful officer."

"You must remain at least two years, now you are here, to get up your strength at all."

"Not two years. I shall limit my stay to half the time. And I shall have much on my hands. First I must look out for a good school for Tom. Then there will be all the visits to pay. You came first, you see, which was natural; and there will be Alfred and Mary, and the Major's relatives. He has so many, and they are so scattered. Some in London, some in Yorkshire, and in other places; all want a visit from me. I think I shall go to Mary next to you. I long to see her. Hers is a very happy marriage, is it not?"

"Very. Dr. Goring is a delightful man, and a fond husband. You and Mary have been fortunate in that respect. Nice children, too, are Mary's."

"And their circumstances are easy?"

"Quite so. Dr. Goring's practice is good, and then Mary has her annuity of three hundred a-year. We wrote you word about it, you know. There is an old saying," smiled Hester, "that the ripe apples always fall in the orchard. Mary, who needed the annuity perhaps less than any of us—certainly far less than poor Alfred—was the one to whom it came. Her godmother, you know, was a rich woman, but eccentric. The annuity is only for her life—it dies with her."

"Yes. It was a lucky thing. You and Lucy are doing well too, Hester?"

"Now we are; very well. But, Jane, you don't know what a struggle and anxiety it has been. Alfred is the worst off. I wish something could be done to aid him."

"I wonder whether the Major has no interest with any people who have livings to bestow?" said Mrs. Pepper. "I must talk the matter over with Alfred, and see about it when I get back to India."

Mrs. Pepper, poor lady, never lived to see her brother, or to go back again. When her visit terminated at Halliwell House, she went to stay with some of her husband's relatives at Clapham—Mr. Pepper, an old bachelor and banker in the City, and his half-sister, Miss Oldstage. From them she purposed going to Middlebury, to Mrs. Goring's, but, alas! she was taken worse at Mr. Pepper's. Her disorder, which was really nothing but weakness, assumed suddenly a more alarming phase; Hester and Lucy hastened to her, and in a few days, before her relatives and friends could believe it, she had passed away.

These were sad tidings to write to her husband: they were sad tidings for all. What would be done with her children? was the exclamation of more than one. But about that arose little embarrassment, for means were abundant: the young boy was placed at school, and Miss Oldstage undertook to bring up the infant girl.

BOOK THE EIGHTH.

CHAPTER XXII.

AT MIDDLEBURY.

AGAIN several years passed on, and we have nothing specially to note of them; they were pregnant with little of moment to the various branches of the Halliwell family: afterwards, events came crowding thick and fast. Hester was now getting to be a woman nearer fifty than forty, those who were boys and girls were growing into men and women, and little children into boys and girls.

A tragical event, full of mystery and suspicion, occurred about this time in Dr. Goring's family. It will be better (as we have done once before) to let Hester relate it in her own words.

I did not often go down to Middlebury: about once in every three or four years. Dr. Goring and Mary had been married about sixteen years, when she had a dangerous illness, and, as it was our midsummer holidays and leisure time with me, I went to Middlebury. They had then six children (without counting the infant who had just died), Mary, the eldest, a gentle, good girl of fifteen, just like her mother. I found my sister very ill indeed, and for the first fortnight I did little but watch by her bedside.

Now, I am apt to take likes and dislikes when I meet

strangers for the first time. People say it is prejudice, therefore I suppose it is so; but it is a prejudice sometimes for, and sometimes against. And I may mention, in defence of this "prejudice" (which I can no more keep from me than I can keep the moon from shining on my house), that I never yet found the instinct mislead me. There was a governess when I went down to Dr. Goring's this time, a Miss Howard. She was sufficiently good-looking, with a colourless face and a very subdued tone and manner of speaking, so remarkably gentle as to impart the idea (to me, at least) that it was more assumed than genuine. I took a strange antipathy to this lady when I first saw her; and though she appeared willing to be on friendly terms with me, the instinct I have spoken of never warned me more strongly against any one. She was about five-and-thirty, but she dressed to look younger.

I sat one afternoon in my sister's room thinking over the observations I had made during my fortnight's stay. I did not like them all. I saw my relatives were living in an extravagant style, which no income—such as theirs—could possibly justify; and I felt sure that that governess was scheming to attract Matthew Goring towards her. *He*, upon the slightest inducement, was ever ready to flirt: and Middlebury knew it. He was a universal favourite, especially with the ladies: gentlemanly, generous, and affable; but he was too fond of talking nonsense, though a kind and affectionate husband.

"What made you think of taking a governess into the house, Mary?" I suddenly asked, letting my work drop on my lap.

"We did it by way of economy," was Mrs. Goring's reply. "The school bills of the two girls were frightfully heavy, and little Jane is coming on now."

"I would have retrenched home expenses, Mary, and

have kept the children at school. Your rate of living is enormously extravagant."

"It really is. But we have somehow fallen into this style of housekeeping, and Matthew would not like to retrench. I fear, though he will not acknowledge it to me, that we are living beyond our income. And if I had died during this illness, as was too likely at one period of it, my annuity would have been lost to him."

"Three hundred a-year is a large sum to lose in a family," I remarked.

"It is not so much as that," she quickly replied. "The insurance takes up—I forget exactly what, but I think more than a hundred of it."

"What insurance?" I said.

"I insured my life some years ago. Did I never tell you about it? I think I must have done so."

But she had not told me. I never heard of it until then.

"It was after a very bad illness, when Jane was born," my sister went on. "They thought I should die, and I thought so too. And whilst I lay here, getting better, it occurred to me that though I could not continue the annuity to my children I might insure my life with part of it, and thus secure them something. So I insured it for three thousand pounds."

"I am very glad to hear it," I said. "Your husband ought to insure his also."

"He has often talked of it, but has never been able to spare the money. We live quite up to our income, Hester, as I tell you; or beyond it."

"Which is the height of imprudence. Supposing you were both—supposing anything were to happen to you both; there would be absolutely nothing for the children but this three thousand pounds."

"Nothing. Excepting the furniture and the book debts."

"Six children, and only three thousand pounds!" I mused; "what would become of them?" And I put on my considering cap again, and began to work out an idea which had been haunting me for some days. "Mary," I said after awhile, "suppose I relieve you of one of the girls —Mary, if you can spare her—and take her to London with me, and finish her education free of expense to you; could you not put the other two to school, discharge the governess, and retrench your home expenses? You might retrench them, it seems to me, by one-half, and yet live in sufficiently good style."

"I am quite willing to retrench, if you can bring Matthew into the same way of thinking," said Mrs. Goring. "But do you believe it would be greater economy to place even two children at school than to keep a governess?

"Yes, I do," was my decided answer. "If I am to help in this matter at all, Mary, Miss Howard must leave."

I suppose I spoke too pointedly, and so overshot my mark, for Mary looked at me, and a warm flush came into her face.

"Hester, you do not like Miss Howard?"

"She may be a good instructress," I coldly answered, "but, in my opinion, she is not altogether a desirable person to retain in your house, the guide and companion of Mary."

"I see what you think," cried my sister, nervously throwing one arm out of bed; "you think she is too familiar with my husband."

"Her manners are certainly not what I approve of, Mary."

"But you know that Matthew talks and laughs with every one," again said Mrs. Goring. "And some young women are vain enough to mistake that for pointed attentions."

"There is not much harm in laughing and talking, when it's confined to that," I growled, feeling angry with Matthew, in my heart; "but his children's governess should be an exception, even from this."

"So I told him," said my sister, "for I did remonstrate with him, one day, about it. In the drawing-room, in my presence, he will pay her more attention than he pays me; at the dinner-table the same: once, in coming home late at night, he gave her his arm, and left me to walk with Mary."

"Then she ought not to have taken it," I interrupted. "No right-minded woman would have done so."

"And he seems to talk to her about all sorts of confidential things, often in a whisper: family matters, money matters, which ought to be conversed on only with me. I believe, too, they go out walking together, or, rather, join each other when they get outside the town, which is very bad on Miss Howard's part. But it is not so much the bare fact of all this that I dislike, as——"

"As what?" I asked, finding Mary hesitate.

"Their manners to each other—though I scarcely know how to express what I mean. They are more considerate, more tender; implying, seemingly, a mutual understanding between themselves and against me. But I must do my husband the justice to say that I believe he never would have thought of all this, but for her first advances to him. *I* saw them, quiet and covert as they were."

"And seeing this, noting this, you have kept and can still keep that woman in your house!" I uttered.

"Hester, at times I have been on the very point of discharging her, but then the thought has occurred to me that it may be all nothing, that Matthew's manner may be alone in fault, and that I may be depriving the children of a good instructress (which she certainly is) through an absurd.

jealous chimera. When I spoke to Matthew, as I told you, he only laughed at me, and wondered how I could be so ridiculous. So I dropped the subject, thinking that, perhaps, I was ridiculous. But has the idea struck you, Hester, during your short stay, that there is too good an understanding between her and my husband ?"

"Oh, I don't say so much as that," I evasively replied, finding she was more alive to the affair than I had suspected. "Your husband's manners are very free, though they generally mean nothing."

"Oh, I know it is nothing more than mere flirting on his part. If I thought there was any positive attachment—that he loved her as he once loved me—I think it would kill me. I have lain here, when I was at the worst, conjuring up a picture—myself gone and forgotten, and *she* the second mother of my children."

"Now, Mary, you are going from one extreme to the other," I remonstrated. But what more I would have said was interrupted by the entrance of the sick-nurse, Mrs. Gill, who came to take my place ; and I went downstairs to find my brother-in-law.

I had heard him come in, not long before, and supposed I should find him in the surgery. This surgery had two entrances to it : one leading from the passage, just past the door of the dining-room ; the other from the garden at the back of the house. The passage door, by which I was about to enter, was pushed to, but not closed ; and as I was going to open it, I heard the voice of Miss Howard inside. I have, all my life, endeavoured to be honourable in my actions, and I hope I have shunned everything that is mean ; but I thought it my duty to listen then.

"I shall soon become a chemist if you bestow these pains upon me," she was saying, with her soft insinuating accents, false as she was. "And what is this ?"

"Oh, that's a very common-place article," responded the merry voice of my brother-in-law; "that's castor-oil."

"Oh dear! And this?"

"That's more common still. It is distilled water."

"That little bottle, up there, labelled 'Poison'—it is always kept by itself in that same place, I observe—is it prussic acid?"

"No; but a poison quite as deadly. It is a preparation of strychnia."

"How is it administered?"

"A very minute portion, taken in water, would destroy life. Shall I try it upon yours?"

"*Would* you?" she murmured, with an affectation of submissive tenderness. "I will give you leave to do so if you wish."

"My darling girl," he replied, "you know I would rather try it on my own."

Then came a silence, and I pushed open the door: but may I never speak truth again, if I did not first hear the sound of a kiss. Matthew Goring had Miss Howard's hand in his, and was whispering to her, while she stood there quietly beside him, her hand passively resting in his, her countenance as well as her eyes cast down in a passive attitude of listening. It was evident that, if he was ready to court, she was more than willing to be courted. On his side—I believe so, even now—it was probably only the passing amusement of an idle moment: her conduct wore an aspect far deeper and more reprehensible. I have asked myself, since, whether I was blinded by prejudice, or partiality, in thus judging her to be worse than he, and I cannot bring myself to think so. What business had she out of her own proper place, the school or drawing-room? What business had she to go hunting after him to his professional apartments, with her wicked excuse of wanting to

learn chemistry, and her soft voice, subdued to childlike innocence ?

I think we all looked rather foolish. The governess drew her hand away, and was the first to break the silence, which she did with the utmost equanimity

"Dr. Goring is willing to give me a little insight into the matter of drugs and chemistry," she began, "so I endeavour, in my few leisure moments, to profit by his kindness. A woman, as instructress of youth, cannot know too much : do you think she can, Miss Halliwell ?"

"I think a woman may acquire an insight into things entirely unfitted for her, unless she takes care what she is about," I answered, quite angrily. "A knowledge of drugs is not necessary for the instruction of Dr. Goring's daughters."

She said no more to me, but turned and thanked him, in a modest, retiring tone, perfectly charming—to any one who had not seen her with her hand lying in his, and heard his kiss upon her lips.

"Matthew," I sharply said, as she hurried away, for I felt terribly cross, "all this must end."

"What must end ?" he inquired, busying himself with his tubes and chemical glasses, the uses of which he had probably been explaining to her, and whistling with unconcern.

"More things than one," I answered. "This familiarity with your daughters' governess is growing beyond a joke, and——"

"You surely do not look upon that nonsense as serious ?" he interrupted, holding a glass cylinder between his eye and the light to see that it was clean.

"I don't know what you call 'serious,'" I indignantly said. "I heard you kiss her."

"Now, Hester," he remonstrated, laughing provokingly

all the while, "you have not lived to these years without knowing that we men like to snatch a kiss from a pretty girl under the rose."

"Girl! pretty!" I ejaculated. "*She's* neither one nor the other."

"An attractive woman, then; how you snap one up, Hester! And no disloyalty to wives, either."

"Your behaviour to Miss Howard, and especially hers to you, is unbecoming in itself and a disgrace to both of you, when carried on in the sight of your wife and daughters," I persisted. "I say nothing of my sister: that she feels this deeply I have discovered to-day; but her retiring, generous disposition induces her to bear in silence what few wives would do. But your daughter! Mary is of an age to see and understand these things. Miss Howard must leave."

"I'm sure I don't care whether she leaves or not," responded the gentleman, with the most apparent unconcern. "But who the deuce is to take care of the children, if you send her away, and Mary ill in bed?"

"That is quite a secondary consideration," I remarked. "Have I your permission to discharge Miss Howard?"

"Well, I don't know. It will look absurdly strange: and so unnecessary. You do her great injustice, Hester, and me too, if you think there's anything wrong. What do you suppose I care for Miss Howard?"

"That you 'care' for her to any extent, I do not fear," I replied, "for when a woman, be she young or getting on in life, so far forgets herself as to step between man and wife—to endeavour to worm herself clandestinely into his affections—all respect for that woman leaves his mind; and though he may frequent her society for the amusement of the hour, that woman has lost, for him, her greatest charm."

"Egad, you are right there, Hester!" cried Dr. Goring,

"When a single woman lapses into a flirtation with a married man, and takes pains to conceal it from the world and the wife, we set her down as a silly fool, who might become something worse if she were tempted."

"Just so. They suit you for amusement, but they are not such as you would place in your home and at your hearth. Many a married man has his 'amusement' in this way, and will have it, I suppose: but whoever is placed about your wife and children, be it friend, governess, or servant, should be made an exception to your rule of admiration."

"I declare I don't much admire Miss Howard," he laughed. "I think the admiration is mostly on her side."

"I think it is," I answered dryly. "And that ought to have rendered it the more incumbent on you to discourage it."

Was his indifference put on? I have often wondered, since.

"And now to something else that must be put a stop to," I continued. "I told you, Matthew, there were more things than one."

"To my chemical experiments?" he asked, by way of mocking me.

"To your home extravagance. Mary says you are putting-by nothing out of your income."

"Putting-by! I should think not. The boot's on the other leg."

"Yet you must be in the receipt of eight or nine hundred a year."

"Not much less, besides Mary's money. But look at our expenses, Hester: the servants, horses, carriage, visiting, children! Matthew's school-bill, for last year, was over a hundred and twenty pounds."

"You should not send him to so expensive a school.

You might live upon five hundred a year, and put by the rest."

"We 'might' live upon two hundred, I suppose, if we were driven to it. But I must keep up my position in the town; and that cannot be done with less than I spend."

"Yes it can," I earnestly added. "You do not need the carriage, you do not need so many servants, and you need not give your extravagant dinner and evening parties. I am going to run away with Mary, and see what sort of a woman I can turn her out. I will promise you that she shall not be a second Miss Howard. The other two girls you can put to school. If I were mistress here, Matthew, I know I could diminish your expenses one-half, and only lop off superfluities—no comforts, no essentials."

"I wish to goodness you could, then," he said, with a good-humoured but incredulous curl on his lip. "Our bills are confoundedly heavy, and I don't always know where to pick up the money to meet them."

He put on his hat as he spoke, for he had to attend a consultation, but I stopped him to say I should at once discharge Miss Howard.

"Well, if it must be so, it must," was his reply, standing still and looking at me. "But you cannot turn her out of the house as you would a dog—you don't mean that. She must have a month's notice."

"If she insists upon it," I grumbled to myself, as I went to look for the governess. But I felt that any woman with a spark of delicacy would prefer to leave at once, under the circumstances.

I entered into no particulars with Miss Howard; I did not allude to the scene in the surgery, but I said that Dr. and Mrs. Goring had come to the resolution of making a change. They were about to place their daughters at

school and had no further occasion for her services, and that she might leave at her earliest convenience.

"I cannot leave without my proper notice!" she exclaimed, turning as white as a sheet. "The agreement with Mrs. Goring was a month's notice on either side."

"Then I give it you now," I said, and there I stopped and hesitated. But I thought it better to go on with what I was about to say. "May I suggest, Miss Howard, that for the month you insist upon remaining here, your manners to Dr. Goring may be characterized by more reserve and circumspection."

"What do you mean?" she retorted.

"It would be superfluous to tell you, since you must well understand my meaning," I replied. "But I may observe, for your future guidance, that if a young woman knew how entirely she forfeits respect when she lapses into undue intimacy with a married man, the respect, not only of the world, *but of him also*, we should see less of this selfish and thoughtless conduct than we are compelled to see now. When an unmarried woman suffers herself to lapse into this discreditable intimacy, she stands little chance, let me tell you, of ever becoming a married one."

"That probably is the cause of your being still single," she burst forth, sending a sneer at my advancing years.

"No, thank God," I fervently responded. "My principles and self-esteem have not yet sunk so low as to suffer me to step between man and wife. A woman, a single woman, who can stoop to flirt with a married man, to draw him to her side, regardless of the outrage to the feelings of his wife, is guilty of as great a crime as are those poor fallen creatures who set themselves out to lead men into guilt. And this opinion is Dr. Goring's as well as mine. Never descend again to play yourself off upon a married man, Miss Howard; he will not thank you for it long."

She looked round the room with her livid face, livid with anger. I thought she was looking for something to throw at me, and to avoid that, and any further unpleasantness, I quitted the room, reminding her that as that was the 1st of July, the day of her departure would be the 1st of August.

That same evening, after tea, I was sitting with Mrs. Goring, when my eldest niece came into the chamber.

"Mamma," she said, "Mrs. Stone and Emily have sent for me, and I am to take my music. May I go?"

"Yes, if you like, Mary," replied my sister. "Where's Frances?"

"I think she is in the nursery, dressing Jane's doll."

"Then where's Miss Howard?"

"I don't know, mamma," was Mary's answer. "I saw her, after tea, in the garden with papa."

That was enough for me, and downstairs I went. "There shall be no private and confidential interviews if I can help it," quoth I to myself. I went by way of the surgery: not because I wanted to steal into the garden by the more private way, but because I thought they might be at that excuse of the chemicals again. The surgery was empty. I thought the garden was so, at first, but as I stood in the corner, just outside the little surgery door, I heard the sound of subdued voices in the summer-house. So I went up the narrow side-path, against the apricot wall, my feet almost treading on the straggling strawberry plants. And Miss Frances, by the way, was not in the nursery. I heard her laughing with the servants in the kitchen.

They did not see me come up: the door of the summer-house faced the other side-wall of the garden. The first words I was near enough to hear were from her.

"What right has she to come down and make these

changes, and interfere in your household? You must have the temper of an angel to put up with it."

"The truth is, my dear" (it was his voice now), "that, as I hinted to you, I am drained dry and ready to catch at straws. Mrs. Goring had no idea that my embarrassments are serious: but if we go on at our present rate of living, we shan't long go on at all. If we can retrench expenses, and so patch up matters, exposure may be avoided. Miss Halliwell's offer of taking Mary is a great help, now that the most expensive period of her education is coming on: but she does this only on condition that the others shall be put to school."

"She has taken a dislike to me," murmured the lady, in a sweetly plaintive tone. "Old maids' prejudices are unfathomable."

This was good from her, with her five and thirty years! I don't know what answer Matthew made. I heard none.

"You are a little in debt?" she went on to ask.

"Jolly well deep in it," was his reply. "It would take many hundreds to set me free."

"Mrs. Goring has property, I have heard. Can you not make it available?"

"Mrs. Goring's money is an annuity, and it dies with her."

"All of it?"

"All. But her life is insured for three thousand pounds."

"What a help that would be to you! It would free you, and doubly free you. What a good thing!"

"Why, you speak as though it were something coming to me to-morrow," laughed Matthew. "My ever having it is the most remote contingency in the world. She may outlive me. And, if not, Mrs. Goring intends that money to go to the children, not to pay off my extravagances."

There is always a little corner of thankfulness in my

heart when I think of that sentence, and of Matthew's cheery, hearty expression when he gave utterance to it. It seems to repeat over to me that he was not the guilty man, the man with murder on his soul, that some have since deemed him.

"Mrs. Goring's life seems a precarious one," she went on; "she is always ailing. I am sure if the three thousand pounds you speak of should drop in, it will be your duty to make use of it. Your ease and comfort should be paramount to every other consideration."

I fear a feeling of positive hatred rose in my heart when I heard her thus make light of the life of my dear sister and his wife. I coughed to let them know I was there, and walked round to the front of the arbour.

She came out then, but not before I saw him draw his arm from round her waist, and she went towards the house.

"Where is Frances?" I said to her.

"With her sister," replied Miss Howard.

"She is in the kitchen with the servants," I retorted. "And I apprehend Mrs. Goring would not approve of her making them her companions."

I said no more. If I had, I might have said too much; and I resolutely bit my lip to impose self-silence. My gentleman had sauntered off towards the vegetables.

I did not see much, after that, during my stay. To be sure, I was out a good deal, calling on old friends, and sometimes spending the evening with them, so that those two, if they wished, may have found opportunities of being together without my knowing it. My sister was improving in health, and sat up for several hours each day, but she did not yet leave her room.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"DIED FROM POISON."

Our own pupils were coming back to us the 10th of July: and on the 7th I returned home, there being several household matters I wished to arrange before they arrived. I took Frances with me—Mrs. Goring, in her weak, nervous state, seemed unwilling to part with Mary, who could now make herself useful in many ways—and quitted Middlebury early in the morning, reaching London and home the same evening.

I was up betimes the next day: I am always an early riser: but we breakfasted later than usual, for at eight o'clock Frances was still sleeping. We would not begin without her, and yet did not like to disturb her, for she was tired, poor child, with her journey, so that it was past nine when we sat down to breakfast.

I was pouring out the second cups of tea, when the postman's knock was heard at the door, and our cook—the other servants being at that hour engaged in their upstair duties—came in with a letter.

"Twopence to pay, ma'am," said the cook.

"Twopence!" I answered, diving into my pocket; "who can have sent an unpaid letter?"

"It is to ask for a prospectus, no doubt," observed Lucy, who had taken the letter, while I paid cook. "But it has the Middlebury postmark!"

"It is Mary's writing, I am sure, Aunt Hester," observed the little girl; "and what a great sprawling seal she has put! She has been getting at papa's wax, too, for it is black."

I took the letter out of Lucy's hand, and a sort of unpleasant tremor came over me when I saw the large black seal. Mary Goring, in her little notes to her young friends, was so found of displaying her blue scented wax. Why had she now used black?

I opened the letter: it was blotted, as if written and folded in haste, and few words were in it. I ran my eye hastily over them, and screamed out. Had my life depended on my not screaming, I could not have helped myself, the shock was so terrible, though I have great command over my feelings in general: how else should I be fitted to train the young?

"Oh, come back to us, my dear Aunt Hester! Mamma is dead. And they say she has been poisoned. Papa is dreadfully in grief. Come directly.

"Your affectionate niece,

"MARY GORING."

Now were not those words enough to make one scream aloud?

I went at once. I sent cook out for a cab, taking off my gingham dress and putting on a black silk while she was gone, and my shawl and bonnet; and when she came back in it I was ready, and drove away to the Paddington railway station. I left the letter with Lucy, but we did not tell Frances. I only said to her that her mamma was not so well. Girls of twelve are easily satisfied.

I could not get off till the twelve o'clock train, and it was night when the Middlebury omnibus—which had to

take me the concluding miles of my journey—reached Middlebury. I trust I shall never again have to pass such a day as that. My suspense and anxiety were hard to bear. Sometimes I felt as though the train did not go quickly enough, and that I must rise from my seat and try to fly over the intervening distance; at others, it seemed as if nothing so horrible could have happened, and that Mary's letter must have been a dream. A gentleman in the same carriage offered me the *Times* to read. I took it, and held it before my eyes; but the letters seemed to swim, and when I did manage to read a sentence, I could not understand it. So I thanked him, and put it down again.

I knocked when I reached my brother-in-law's; very softly, as became a house where death has entered. Susan opened the door—the housemaid: a neat, willing girl. "Oh, ma'am! Oh, ma'am!" she exclaimed, throwing up her hands when she saw me. "But I am glad you are come."

"Is your mistress—alive!" I asked. I don't know why I should have said that; for surely no hope could have lurked within me, after the letter.

"Dear ma'am," she uttered, bursting into tears, "alive! she died yesterday afternoon. Master's in there," she added, gently opening the door of the dining-room.

He was in there alone, sitting moodily by the window, and there was no light in the room, saving what came from the street lamp outside, through the muslin curtains and the white blind. Even in that uncertain light I could see the traces of suffering—his pale face, his disordered hair and his swollen eyes.

"Oh, Hester, Hester!" he exclaimed, coming forward and taking both my hands, "this is dreadful."

I cannot remember all that passed. I believe I asked to

see her ; I asked particulars about her death, and I wept with him.

It was already known beyond doubt that the cause of her death was poison. She had dined at one o'clock and had lain down on the bed after it to sleep, as was usual since her illness : some toast-and-water stood at the bed-side ; and when she awoke thirsty, and asked for something, the nurse gave her this. She drank it, complained of its bitter taste, fell into convulsive pains and soon after died.

"Could anything have been put into the toast-and-water ?" I exclaimed.

"So it would appear," he answered ; "but it is a great mystery."

"Then, Matthew Goring," I rejoined, peering steadily at him, "*who* can have put it in ?"

"I know not," he answered earnestly. "As Heaven is looking down upon me, Hester, and hears my assertion, I am as ignorant and innocent of this business as you are."

"Where was Miss Howard at the time ?"

"Hester," he gravely said, "you are prejudiced against Miss Howard, but for the love of justice do not carry it so far as to throw this suspicion upon her. A gentlewoman of irreproachable character, of refined feelings ; and you would point to her as being guilty of a crime black as night !"

"It is you who are blindly prejudiced in her favour," I replied to him. "I do think that if she were proved guilty of this, *you* would not believe it."

"I should not," was Matthew's avowal. "Not from any reason you hint at, but because I feel her to be utterly incapable of even thinking of such a crime, much less committing it. But pray do not continue to suspect me of undue preference for her. If, as you once hinted, she caused uneasiness to my dear wife, I wish, to my soul, she had never entered the house."

"Ay, that's always the case—repentance when it is too late. Many a man would be more careful not to give his wife cause for such anxiety, if he thought he was soon to lose her." I could not help saying that: it was in my thoughts, so out it came.

I did suspect Miss Howard: and many a time since have I prayed to be forgiven if I suspected her wrongly: but, alas! I suspect her still. In Dr. Goring's present mood, it was of no use harping upon it. I went upstairs with him, into his chamber. My ill-fated sister was lying there, on the bed where I had left her the previous morning, getting well; and now she was cold and lifeless.

"Will there be an inquest?" I asked, when I could check my tears.

"It will be held to-morrow," he replied.

"She does not look as though she had died from poison," I said, gazing on her calm, pale features. "What poison was it?"

"Strychnia. The traces have been detected in her, and also in the toast-and-water remaining in the glass."

"Matthew," I said, looking at him, "you pointed out that very poison to Miss Howard the other day, in your surgery. I was halting at the door to come in, and heard what you said."

"True. She was asking me the names of various articles, and that amongst the rest. I remember it."

"Could the poison which has destroyed *her* have come from that bottle?"

"Hester, I know no more than you where the poison came from," he replied, his tones full of mourning and anguish; "I wish I did know. The phial stands in the same place in the surgery, and appears not to have been touched."

"What name is it that you call it?"

"It was a preparation of strychnia."

"That must be a new poison. I never heard of it."

"It is little known, excepting to medical men."

The sick-nurse, Mrs. Gill, gave me the most explicit account of the awful business. As I was leaving the death chamber with Dr. Goring, she was passing, and I turned back into it with her. He went downstairs. She was a good old soul, but very unsuspicious.

"My poor missis had dined sumptuously, ma'am, for her appetite was coming back to her, as you know. The wing and breast of a roast chicken, and a bit of bacon, and parsley-and-butter, and some stout. Dr. Goring ran up, when he had done carving for them in the dining-room, with a decanter of port wine in his hand. 'Some glasses, Mrs. Gill,' he said, and I brought 'em to him, and he poured out the wine. My missis drank one glass, and he drank two: he wanted her to have another, and said it wouldn't hurt her, but she said, 'No,' not as she had taken the stout. So he left the decanter on the mantelpiece, and told me to be sure and give her a glass about seven in the evening, if he was not in, himself. Then she lay down on the bed for her afternoon's sleep, and he leaned over her and gave her a kiss—for, if he did—ahem!—if he did admire other faces, he was a most tender man to his wife—and he went downstairs. I followed him, to go to my dinner, only stopping to pour out a glass of toast-and-water, and put it by my missis, as I always did in the afternoon. Sometimes she would drink it all, and sometimes she'd not drink any of it, but she liked it to be there. Well, ma'am, I went down, shutting the bedroom door after me, to keep out the noise. I didn't hurry over my dinner, and that's the truth, for I thought my missis would be asleep and wouldn't want me, and I know it must have been getting on for three when I got back upstairs. The bedroom door was not closed then,

only pushed to, so I knew somebody had been in the room: in my own mind, I supposed it was Miss Mary. I stole in, and looked at my missis: she was sleeping sweetly—here, ma'am, on her own side of the bed. Well, I went and stood for a minute at the window, and there I saw Mrs. Cox's carriage come a-rattling down the street, with her and Miss Cox in it. It stopped at our door, and their great oaf of a footboy got down, and gave such a peal upon the knocker as shook the house. My missis started up in a fright. 'What's that, nurse?' she called out; 'any of the children hurt?' 'Bless you, no, ma'am,' says I, 'it's that dratted knocker. I wish folks wouldn't come noising and calling here, when people's asleep as wants sleep.' And for nothing, it weren't, but to leave a card, for the carriage and Mrs. and Miss druv off again. 'Try and doze a bit more, ma'am,' I said. 'I don't know,' said my missis; 'I think I am thoroughly aroused. Give me some toast-and-water, nurse, I am thirsty.' 'That's the bacon you ate, ma'am,' I said, and handed her the glass of toast-and-water, which stood ready on the little table by the bedside where I had put it. She drank it nearly all. 'It's as bitter as gall, Mrs. Gill,' she exclaimed; 'what have you done to it?' 'Bitter?' I said, 'why, I made it with my own two sinful hands this morning, and I'm sure the bread weren't burnt. It was not bitter before dinner.' With that I turned to the jug, which stood atop of the drawers, and poured a drop into one of the wineglasses, after rinsing the drain of port wine out, and tasted it. And I felt then that missis's mouth must be out of taste, for it was not bitter at all, but sweet, fresh toast-and-water. I did not say so, for it ain't my place, ma'am, to contradict my ladies' fancies, and they weak and ill, but was going to wash out the two wineglasses, when I saw missis gasping on the bed. I rang the bell furiously, a deal longer and fiercer than that blundering footboy had

pealed upon the knocker, and Dr. Goring, who was smoking in the arbour——"

"Smoking where?" I asked.

"In the arbour, ma'am, the summer-house in the garden. He heard the ringing and came flying up. Susan came at the same time, and Miss Mary came. Oh, ma'am, I can hardly tell you what happened next: my missis was in dreadful agony, and the room was full of confusion, servants and children crowding out and in. Dr. Goring was the first to call out that she must have been poisoned, and the other doctors, when they came, said the same. They could not save her, and before five she was gone. Poor Miss Mary took on the least, to look at, but she felt it, I saw, more than any of them, except her father. It was me as whispered her to send for you, and she wrote a line, standing up, and Susan tore off with it, without a bonnet, and without a stamp, that she might save the post. I thought it right that you should be here, ma'am."

"Quite right," I said. "But now, Nurse Gill, answer me a serious question. How, and when, could the poison have been administered to Mrs. Goring?"

"When she drank the toast-and-water, ma'am," was the old woman's unhesitating reply. "I put my finger into the little that was left in the glass and tasted it, and sure enough it was as bitter as wormwood. Dr. Goring tasted it also after me, and told me to tie a bladder over it, and locked it up in my cupboard till the doctors came: he said there was poison in it. The doctors have got it now; they tasted it when I gave it to them, and they called the poison by a hard name, and Dr. Goring said he had some of the same sort of poison in his surgery."

"Nurse, how could the poison have got into the glass?"

"Why, ma'am, it couldn't have got there of its own accord, so it must have been put in; but if you hung me I

never could guess who by. Who in this house would do such a thing? None of us. If we could only find out who had been in the room!"

"Where was Dr. Goring?"

"Smoking in the arbour, ma'am, as I told you. When I followed him downstairs, as I was going to my dinner, I saw him stroll up the garden, and go into it, with his case of cigars and a newspaper. He was lighting a cigar as he went."

"Was he alone?"

"Quite alone, ma'am. The day before, the two young gentlemen was with him, but they was both out yesterday. Master Goring had went spending the day in the country at the Halliwells', and young Alfred had went to school, for I see him from this window racing off to it, just as his papa came up with the wine."

"Could Dr. Goring have come in from the garden without being seen? Of course, Nurse Gill, you will not think I suspect him, in thus questioning," I proceeded; "but by throwing all possible light upon the movements of the house at that moment, we may obtain some clue to the real criminal."

"In course, ma'am," acquiesced the nurse, "nobody would be so wicked or so silly as to doubt Dr. Goring. A better husband never lived, barring a little bit of joking and talking that he is fond of having with the ladies—and most men are alike for that, so far as I see. He could not have come in without our seeing him, for our dinner-table was close to the window, and we had full view of the garden. Unless," added the nurse slowly, as if debating the point with herself, "he had come down the little path leading to the surgery; but then some of us must have seen him come out of the arbour and cross to it. No, ma'am, he could not have come out at all."

"But you are not sure?" I urged.

"I would not swear it, but I'm morally sure," was her reply. "Rely upon it, ma'am, he never stirred out of that summer-house till I rang the bell and brought him rushing upstairs."

"Then let us go on again," I said. "Assuming that it could not be Dr. Goring or the servants——"

"I'll be upon my oath, ma'am, if necessary," interrupted the nurse, "that not a servant left the kitchen."

"The servants or the children," I proceeded, as if she had not broken the thread of my sentence, "there is no one else in the house—but Miss Howard."

"Dear ma'am," uttered Nurse Gill, "you'd never go to suspect her! A handsome young lady—though not over young, maybe, for the matter of that—clever, edicated, plays and sings like a cherrybim, and with her mild, quiet voice—I'd as soon think it was myself as her."

"I was only asking about the position of those in the house, if you remember, not talking of suspicion, nurse. Do you know where Miss Howard was whilst you were at dinner?"

"She was in the dining-room all the while, as I believe, and she never came out of it. Miss Mary can tell you the same, ma'am, if you'll please to have her called in."

"Will she be afraid to come in here?"

"Not she, ma'am. She has been in ten times, poor thing, sobbing over her mamma. She is either in the nursery or with Miss Howard, I suppose. I'll go and find her."

Mary came in. When her surprise—for Susan had not told her of my arrival—and her first burst of tears were over, I began to question her.

"Mary," I said, "I am trying to ascertain in what part of the house you all were yesterday, during Mrs. Gill's absence at dinner. Your papa was in the garden; the

servants were in the kitchen ; the boys were out ; and you and little Jane, nurse says, were in the nursery."

"Yes, aunt, we were. Miss Howard had been in a passion with Jane at the morning's lessons, and she ordered her into the nursery, and sent her a piece of dry bread for dinner. I thought it a shame, for it was only Miss Howard's temper that was in fault—but it has been very bad ever since she knew she must leave—and when papa rose from the dinner-table to go to mamma's room, Alfred ran off to school, and I went up to the nursery to take Jane some cherries, leaving Miss Howard in the dining-room."

"Did you see nothing of Miss Howard, after that, before the alarm ?"

"Oh yes. I went downstairs almost directly for some cherries. She was still in the dining-room, netting, and I remember she complained of Alfred, and said he was a careless boy and had gone to school without washing his hands. I then went back to the nursery, and stayed there till nurse and baby came up from dinner."

"The nursemaid, she means, ma'am," interrupted Nurse Gill. "She left the kitchen as I did, and we both came up the stairs together, Baby—as they still call little Master John—had dropped asleep over his dinner, and she was going to lay him down. I say he sleeps too much for a child of three years old."

"And when the nursemaid went up, you went down," I remarked to Mary. "Where was Miss Howard then ?"

"Still netting in the dining-room, Aunt Hester ; and she looked as if she had not stirred from her seat. Soon afterwards mamma's bell rang violently."

"I won't say she had not stirred from her seat, for I don't know nothing about that," broke in Mrs. Gill, "but I will say she had not left the room, for, if she had, we must have heard her in the kitchen."

"Did you hear no one go up or downstairs?" I inquired.

"Not a soul," replied the woman, "and we had the kitchen door open. The house seemed as still as it is at this moment. If this dreadful thing had not happened, I could have been upon my oath that nobody had been near the stairs."

"You heard Miss Mary, when she came down for the cherries?

"Of course, ma'am, we heard her; that was just as we were beginning dinner. We heard her come out of the nursery, run down the stairs, go into the dining-room, stop there a minute, run up again, and shut the nursery door. You shut it loudly, Miss Mary, as though the wind had took it, and I said to the servants that missis had not had time to get to sleep, or it might have woke her."

"Still—talking, as you all no doubt were, over your dinner, Mrs. Gill—I think you could not have heard quiet footsteps on the stairs. And whoever did this deed, did not, you may be sure, go about it with noisy ones."

"Ma'am, we was unusually still. The cook—though, of course, you have not heard of it—had just had bad news. Her brother was at his mason's work atop of a house, and the ladder fell with him, and it was feared both his legs was broke. They had been to tell her of it, and she was as low as could be, though she weren't crying, and we was all sorry for her, and I can assure you we ate our dinners in silence, and there was hardly a word spoke. Sometimes there's enough talking and laughing going on with 'em, but there wasn't yesterday. I was just going to tell the news to my poor missis, when she was took."

"You heard nothing, Mary?" I said to her.

"Nothing at all, Aunt Hester. And we were quiet also in the nursery. Jane was eating the cherries, and I was reading."

"You see, ma'am, it's a complete mystery," observed Nurse Gill.

It did indeed seem so, and I could not fathom it. I took an opportunity of asking Dr. Goring whether he had come in from the arbour or not, after going there.

"I never left it," he replied. "I had my cigars, and had stretched myself at ease on the bench, reading the county paper. The violent ringing of Mary's bell aroused me, and I ran in."

Oh yes, yes, I am sure he spoke the truth. *I* did not suspect Dr. Goring, for to commit a cruelty or a crime was altogether foreign to Matthew's nature

The coroner's inquest was held, but it failed to throw any light upon the mystery. Amongst the witnesses examined was Miss Howard. She deposed that she had been in the dining-room the whole time the nurse was at dinner, shut in there, and that she had heard nothing. Suspicion did not fall upon her, except in my own heart, and I could not openly accuse her. There were no proofs whatever. The verdict returned was, "Died from poison; but by whom administered there is no evidence to show."

On the day but one afterwards my dear sister was buried. The churchyard was so crowded with spectators that the clergyman could scarcely push his way through them, as he walked at the head of the coffin; and at the conclusion of the service, as the mourners were leaving the grave, a hiss arose from the crowd—they were hissing Dr. Goring. He, his sons, Matthew and Alfred, and Mr. Halliwell (Tom Halliwell, as we once called him, but his father was dead now—ah! Mary had better have had Tom, than have come to this dreadful ending) were the chief mourners, but several friends had followed. Matthew had gone direct to school from Mr. Halliwell's with a son of his, the very evening of his mother's death, but he was sent for to attend the funeral.

He was a handsome, merry boy of fourteen, very like his father. Alfred was ten. I shall never forget poor Dr. Goring when he came in from the funeral. The lads went upstairs, but he came into the darkened dining-room where I was, and throwing his hat with its crape streamers on a chair, sat down and sobbed as if his heart would break. I was calm then, myself; I think I had cried so much that my eyes, for the moment, were drained dry, and I went up to him and begged him to be composed.

"Hester," he sobbed; "Hester, they have hissed me at Mary's grave. As you stand there, it is truth."

"Who has hissed you?" I asked.

"The mob in the churchyard. They whispered 'Murderer.' God knows I have not deserved it. If my dear wife was murdered, it was not by me. I would have given my life to prolong hers."

I thought it best not to talk just then, and he grew composed after a while, though, I must say, his face was full of suffering and sorrow; but at night, when the candles were lighted and we were alone again, the children being in bed, I inquired what he meant to do.

"In what way?" he asked.

"About your children, and your housekeeping matters. Who is to conduct your house?"

"Oh, Hester, I cannot think of these things. They must take their chance. Unless you can put them on some sort of footing before you go again."

I tried to do so. I saw Miss Howard out of the house (with a true thanksgiving) and I established Mary as housekeeper. Though only fifteen, she was so sensible and steady that I had no fear of leaving her to manage things; and she was to go as morning pupil to Miss Sherwood's school, until her education was completed. Matthew and Alfred were placed, together, at a less expensive establishment

than the one Matthew had hitherto been in, and the little fellow, John, I consigned to Susan, who undertook the charge of him. I would have taken Jane back with me, but Matthew said he could not be deprived of wife and children at once. Then I induced Matthew to lay down the carriage, and discharge the coachman and two of the maids, and make a reduction in many other ways. Altogether, I did what I could, and left for home, with many words of advice to Mary, an injunction to her to write to me weekly, and a promise to go down at Christmas.

I have said that I think none, save myself, suspected Miss Howard: certainly not any of the immediate family: but there were whispers in the town as to Dr. Goring, though I am sure he did not merit them. People hinted at the windfall that insurance money was to him, and his practice, for the moment, fell off considerably. None knew, I dare say none ever will know, the truth of this mysterious crime; it happened in silence and secrecy, and so it remains buried. Sometimes, in my dreams, I see Miss Howard standing, barefooted, by a bedside, on which lies a happy wife, sleeping calmly. I see her leaning over a small table, with a phial in her hand, and I see her drop something from it into a glass which stands there. Then I see her steal away with breathless caution, and glide down the stairs in silence, until she comes to a room where many bottles and jars, on shelves, and chemical tubes, lie about, and I see her mount a chair softly, and put that phial into its place in a corner, and then she creeps back again to a sitting-room close by, closes the door with cat-like stillness, thrusts her feet into her shoes, sits down and takes up some work. And I have noted the form of Dr. Goring hovering near, and sometimes he seems to look on approvingly through all; then I notice that he is stone-blind, and cannot see as I do. And I awake, shivering and

comfortless, and cry out with horror and pain, as I did that fearful morning when I received Mary Goring's letter. And then I remember that it is all a dream and that I am very foolish.

But I know one thing; and I will speak out my sentiments, and people may call me an old maid for them if they will. If I had the handling of these women-serpents, these single females, who come envying and trying to destroy the wedded happiness which they have never been asked to share, I would cause them to be paraded through the town on a market day, in a white garment, according to the former custom of doing penance, and then have them privately whipped. For when they insinuate their treacherous arts between man and wife, they are deliberately flying in the face of a divine command: "THOSE WHOM GOD HATH JOINED TOGETHER, LET NOT MAN PUT ASUNDER."

CHAPTER XXIV.

A WOODEN LEG.

A SERIOUS misfortune fell, about this time, upon Mrs. Copp. Strictly speaking, it was upon her son, but he did not care for it half so much as she did. The Captain—as he had long been—was with his vessel in the Chinese seas, when it was attacked by a piratical junk. A desperate engagement ensued, and the Captain—we must borrow his own words—"licked the devils into shivers." But alas, though the victory was glorious, poor Captain Copp was wounded in the leg, which was less glorious, for it resulted, later, in its being taken off. He came home, sold his share in the vessel, of which he was part owner, gathered together what other odds and ends of means he was possessed of, the interest of which was sufficient to live upon, and retired from the merchant service. Mrs. Copp spent a whole month in groans and lamentations; it was so heart-sickening to see her fine boy, in the very prime of life, viz. forty years, pegging about upon a wooden leg. Of course he would make his home with her; of that she never entertained a doubt; and when her grief subsided, she commenced various preparations and changes accordingly. Captain Copp rendered them futile. He went a long journey; it was to pay a visit to an old ship-comrade at Coastdown. He fell in love with the little fishing village, determined to establish himself there, and took a cottage

off-hand. Aunt Copp was violently wrath, and stormed much, and went storming up to London, where the Captain then was, buying furniture for his new home. She could do nothing with the Captain as to changing his determination, and she went down and stayed with her nieces at Halliwell House. The Captain occasionally made his appearance by the omnibus; and Mrs. Copp told him to let the furniture-buying alone, and she would see to it. The Captain certainly was displaying all the proverbial wisdom of a sailor in his purchases, securing the most incongruous articles, and ordering them, packed and sent off before his mother could catch sight of them, and she looked after him pretty sharply.

"He'll be wanting a servant," said Aunt Copp one day to Hester; "some one who can manage for him. He has no more idea of management than an owl."

"I think I know a young woman who would suit him. She lived with us more than three years, and——"

"Then she won't do," snapped Aunt Copp, who had never recovered her temper since the Captain first took the Coastdown cottage. "I am not going to leave Sam with a giddy young woman. He must have an old one."

"She is neither young nor giddy, Aunt Copp," replied Hester. "It is several years since she lived with us, and she was not a young girl then. You have heard me speak of Sarah. She was with us when that affair happened about Mrs. Nash's handkerchiefs. She left us to be married; but something that Sarah did not like came to light about the man, and she would not have him. She has been in service since, but is out of place now."

"Perhaps she would not leave London to live in a nasty wretched fishing hole, that has not ten decent houses in it," grunted Aunt Copp. "No one in their senses would

I wish Sam's other leg had been off before he had gone and found it out."

"I will send and tell her to call here," said Hester. "She is a thoroughly good servant—steady, honest and straightforward. If she has a fault, it is that she is free with her tongue."

"She and Sam will have some tussles, then; for he won't stand that. But that's their own look-out."

That same evening Sarah came: a most respectable-looking woman, now getting on for forty. Captain Copp happened to be there, and pronounced that she looked a "likely one."

"What can you do?" demanded Aunt Copp, giving her a keen look.

"Anything that's wanted," answered Sarah

"Now, mother," interrupted the Captain, "let me have the overhauling of the young woman: she's to serve me, not you. Can you cook a beefsteak, lass?"

"Yes, sir. Broiled, or fried, or in the Dutch-oven before the fire; just as you may like to have it."

"And swab the decks?"

"If that means scouring rooms—yes, I can," answered Sarah.

"Can you wash out a shirt and iron it?"

"I have done plenty of 'em, sir."

"And sewed on buttons?"

"Many a dozen."

"You'll do!" cried Captain Copp. "What's the figure a month? I'm not rich, mind."

"Do!" screamed Mrs. Copp; "you are out of your senses, Sam. You are not engaging a sailor. A servant's different from an able-bodied. You have asked her nothing. Why, if you go hiring servants after that fashion, you'll get a pretty set about you. Young woman, are you a

particularly steady character? If not, you had better confess it; for I could not think of leaving any other with a young man like my son."

"I don't call this gentleman young," returned Sarah. "He looks as if he'd never see fifty again."

Captain Copp really did. What with his weather-beaten countenance, its scars, and his wooden leg, he looked ten years more than his age. They all laughed at Sarah's remark—none more heartily than the Captain himself. Mrs. Copp told her she was mistaken.

"Well," observed Sarah, whom the laughing had not disturbed in the least, "whether I'm with an old one or a young one, I never was unsteady yet, and I'm not a-going to begin now."

"You and your master will be in the house alone; there will be no mistress," said Mrs. Copp, "so you must be up to the management."

"It's all one to me whether there's a mistress, or whether there isn't," repeated Sarah. "I know what my place is, and the work that's necessary in a house, and if I'm hired, I'll undertake to do it."

But Mrs. Copp had a great many more questions to ask, and suggestions to offer; and she then told Sarah to come the next evening for a final answer, and to settle the question of wages, intimating that *she* gave only eight pounds a year to her servant in the country. The Captain wondered why Sarah could not have her answer then, and when she left he pegged across the room with his wooden leg, followed her, and closed the door after him.

"Hello, lass! young woman! here! Don't steer off so fast."

"Sir?" said Sarah, returning.

"Don't you pay attention to the women-folk in there. They said there'd be no missus; they'd like to frighten you; there will be one."

"Then I suppose you are going to be married, sir?" said Sarah, who generally spoke out what she thought.

"That's just it, lass."

"Well, it won't matter to me," observed Sarah. "I'd as soon serve two people as one; and sooner, I think, for the sake of more company. We should have been uncommon dull, sir, by our two selves."

"All right," nodded the Captain. "She is not one that will swear at you, I promise that. And, I say" (with a jerk of the head towards the dining-room), "if they want to beat your pay down, let 'em. I'll square it up with you."

The Captain pegged back again, and Sarah departed. She appeared again the following evening, in pursuance of her agreement. Mrs. Copp had been preparing a long string of lectures, which chiefly turned upon morality of conduct, to the extreme amusement of Lucy Halliwell, who knew Sarah was not one to need it. Hester sat apart, sewing, with Amy Zink, who had long been an efficient and patient teacher at Halliwell House.

"I need not remark, young woman," proceeded Aunt Copp, "how necessary it will be for you to keep yourself select, and to yourself. His place is the parlour, and yours is the kitchen. Sailors are particularly loose in their ideas, and with nobody in the house but you and your master, the neighbours will——"

"But there will be somebody else," interrupted Sarah, who had no idea that the information volunteered to her by the Captain was to be kept secret. "There is to be a mistress!"

"Where did you hear that?" demanded Mrs. Copp.

"He told me—master that is to be—when he followed me out of the room last night."

"He meant me," said Mrs. Copp majestically. "But

that will be but for a short time, just to get his house set to rights. My home is in Liverpool."

"Oh no, not you, ma'am," replied Sarah; "a wife. He is going to marry."

"He did not say that?" cried the astonished Mrs. Copp.

"Yes, he did," answered Sarah. "He told me I was a-going to have a mistress, but I needn't be afeared, for she was not one as would swear at me. So I asked him outright whether he meant that he was a-going to take a wife, and he said yes, he did mean it."

What Aunt Copp's wrath might have brought her to, it is impossible to say, for she fully believed this to be an invention of Sarah's to escape further lecturing; but at that moment Amy Zink threw her hands up to her face, and burst into hysterical sobs.

"What on earth's the matter now?" cried Aunt Copp, turning round.

"Amy," cried Lucy; "Amy! Are you ill?"

Amy sobbed on, emitting also sundry moans and ejaculations; and Hester, after a few moments, seemed to understand. Perhaps she had been more observant than the others; her suspicions had once been half aroused.

"Amy," she said, "compose yourself. Samuel has asked you to be his wife, has he not?"

"O-o-o-o-h!" groaned Amy. "Don't be angry with him, please! Don't turn me out!"

"Has he asked you?" quickly added Lucy.

"Yes, he has!" returned Amy, sobbing until she choked. "Indeed, Mrs. Copp, I'll do everything for him! I'll serve him every minute of my days. Indeed, Miss Halliwell, Miss Lucy, I never *thought* of such a thing as his choosing me till he had done it, and then I trembled so I couldn't believe my ears. It was last Sunday afternoon, when the servants were out, and you sent me into the kitchen to show

him how the new cooking-range acted. Oh! what shall I do?"

Aunt Copp sat down, completely cowed. Never had Sam taken so iniquitous an advantage of her. The settling himself at Coastdown was play compared with this.

When he appeared the next day, she attacked him violently, and asked how he came to do it.

"Well," answered the Captain equably, "it occurred to me that I might as well splice with somebody before I went down there, and I thought she'd do as well as another. And a sight better than some; for, let me blow off as sharp as I will, she's not one to blow back again."

"Why, she's older than you!"

"Don't know anything about that," answered the Captain, "and don't care. Very like she may be; but she doesn't look as old as me, by one-half. Oh, we shall do, mother!"

Aunt Copp went back forthwith to Liverpool, in dreadful dudgeon, and Captain Copp fixed the day of his marriage with Amy for a quiet morning at the neighbouring church. The day before the wedding, Miss Oldstage called at Halliwell House with Thomas and Jessie Pepper, Thomas a boy with a round face and a colour. The children were orphans now, Colonel Pepper having died in India the previous year. They were left very well off. Miss Oldstage stayed to dine and take an early tea, and they were about to depart when Captain Copp, who had come in, gave an unceremonious invitation to young Tom Pepper to stop and attend his wedding on the morrow. Tom was immediately wild to do so, and said his aunt Priscilla and Jessie might go home without him. So it was settled that he should remain for the night.

"What are you to be, Tom?" asked Lucy, when his aunt had left.

"I am to be a soldier," answered Tom. "It is decided."

"What! go into the army?"

Tom nodded his head in glee.

"I am very sorry, then, Tom," said Lucy. "You may get shot."

"Papa did not," answered the lad. "And think of all the engagements he was in, Aunt Lucy; especially those bloody battles of the Punjab. Wasn't Chillianwallah a stunner for slaughter?"

"Miss Oldstage says she has talked herself hoarse, striving to persuade you to be a minister," continued Lucy.

"Do you know why she wants me?" answered young Tom. "There's a fellow always going there when my guardian's out—a thin scarecrow of a Methodist parson—and he's trying to persuade Aunt Priscilla to desert church, and to go to that little round chapel of his, which he calls Jecoliah."

"For shame, Tom!" interrupted Lucy, putting on a grave face, while Captain Copp slapped his leg in ecstasy.

"Aunt Priscilla tells him she shall never turn round from church on a Sunday; but she goes to his chapel sometimes on the week-day prayer-meeting evening. She took me and Jessie one evening. My! you should have heard the singing!"

"Tom," interrupted Lucy again, "I will not hear you speak against any religious sect, whatever they may be. It is very wrong: it is like making a joke of religion."

"I don't speak against religion, Aunt Lucy," interrupted the boy; "I know that is wrong; but I shall speak against that Brother Straithorn. He is always worrying Aunt Priscilla to make me a minister—Sparkinson say it's because he'd like to get the training of me. And I don't speak against him because he is a Methodist parson, but because he's an old hypocrite, and I know he is."

"How do you know it?"

"I'm sure of it," logically answered Tom Pepper, "and Gus Sparkinson knows it too. He's a sneak, that's what he is. He comes sneaking to the house when my guardian, Uncle Pepper, is out, but he dare not show his face there when he is at home. I don't like sneaks."

"Nor I, Tom," said the sailor. "Is your uncle kind to you?"

"Very. Rather stiff and particular; but then, you know, he is old. He was a great many years older than papa. And Aunt Pris is three years younger than papa."

"What brings her name Oldstage?" cried Captain Copp. "I forget all about it. Why isn't it Pepper, if she is their sister?"

"The mother was married twice," explained Lucy. "On her first husband's death, she married a Mr. Oldstage."

"My guardian wants me to go into his bank," continued Tom. "But I can't, for I'd rather be a soldier than anything in the world."

"Stick to it, lad," cried Captain Copp. "My father wanted me to be anything but a sailor, but I couldn't be persuaded. I had a sailor's craft in my head, and you have a soldier's."

"Papa directed, in his will, that I was to be allowed my choice of profession," added Tom; "so Aunt Priscilla and Brother Straithorn can't do me out of it."

The following morning rose, and the wedding was as quiet as could be. Tom Pepper and Lucy (who put off her mourning for the day) went to church with them, and a seafaring friend of the Captain's, named Luttrell.

So Captain Copp's nuptial knot was tied, and he and his wife Amy left for Coastdown, where Sarah had preceded them.

BOOK THE NINTH.

CHAPTER XXV.

A SECRET MARRIAGE.

Aunt Copp had once prophesied that Hester's life would be full of business and care, and it really seemed like it. They had only just got Captain Copp's wedding over, when a letter arrived from Mr. Halliwell at Chelson, saying that his wife (who had long been in a weak state of health) was worse than usual, and begging Hester to go there.

"What is to be done, Lucy?"

"I do not see how you can refuse to go," was Lucy's reply. "Poor Alfred! what trouble and worry he has! And the very last man formed by nature for a life of care."

"Don't say that, Lucy," remonstrated Hester; "to us he seemed so; but, rely upon it, the back is always fitted to the burden. It may be that had Alfred been more favourably circumstanced, he would have led a life of dreamy, useless indolence—have kept a curate to do the work, and shuffled off action and responsibility from himself."

Hester wrote an answer, and started for Chelson on the following Monday. The rail conveyed her thither in a few hours, and she got out on to the platform. She was looking for her trunk when a boy, who appeared to be one of the employed, and was busy with the porters, ran up to her.

"If you please, are you Aunt Hester?"

She was taken by surprise. Could it be that one of her brother's boys was working at the railway-station? "Who are you?" she asked.

"I am Sam, Aunt Hester. Next to Tom. Shall I see to your luggage?"

"Yes, my dear. I will walk on."

"The omnibus will go round the town directly. Papa told me to put you into it."

But Hester preferred to walk, Sam calling after her to ask if she knew her way. She remembered it quite well, reached the house, and knocked. The door was opened by a flaunty-looking servant, with open sleeves and a piece of round white lace stuck on the back of her head. Hester wondered whether she called it a cap.

"Is Mr. Halliwell at home?"

"Mr. Halliwell!" was the answer. "What, the parson?"

"Yes. The Reverend Mr. Halliwell. Is he at home?"

"He don't live here, mum. He lives at the Vicarage."

"At the Vicarage!" repeated Hester in surprise.

"Yes, he do," was the girl's answer. "He have moved into it, out of here, this two years."

Hester turned towards the Vicarage, with an oppressed feeling at her heart. To think that they should have gone back to that terrible place, where, as Mabel had once observed to her, the wet ran down the walls and the odours made her ill. Her brother was standing at the churchyard steps. Strangely altered; bowed, and gray and broken! in appearance an old man, though not yet fifty.

"Are you walking, Hester?" he exclaimed. "I told Samuel to put you into the omnibus."

"I felt cramped with the journey," she replied, as he took her hand, "and thought the walk would do me good. How is Mabel?"

"Better to-day. It is the thought of your coming that has brightened her. I fear, Hester, we shall lose her."

"Alfred," she exclaimed, almost passionately, "what brings you back, living at this damp place again?"

"There was no help for it," he sadly said. "Expenses were so heavy upon me, I was unable to pay rent."

Unconsciously Hester had halted, leaning with her elbow on the low gate of the churchyard. Her heart was full. "I did not know Samuel," she observed.

"I dare say not. He was a little chap in petticoats, I suppose, when you were last here."

"I mean I never should have looked out for him as one of the railway servants. I do not speak in any spirit of false pride, Alfred, but it vexed me to see him there."

"I cannot do better," replied Mr. Halliwell. "Perhaps in time something may turn up. I strove to keep my boys to occupations only fitted for gentlemen. I was in hopes, great hopes, of sending George to college—in a subordinate capacity, of course—as a servitor; and I kept him at home to his reading and his classics. But one cannot confine boys of seventeen indoors, and always have an eye over them. I am obliged to be out much, and it seems George used to get out. He made acquaintance with expensive companions; they led him into debt, and it nearly ruined me."

"Debt which you had to pay?" asked Hester.

"Yes. It was almost sixty pounds. I thought every stick and stone we had must have been sold. But they gave me time, and are giving it me still."

"And where's George now?"

"That's the worst part of the business. It is that," he added, lowering his voice, "which has brought down his mother. He had as good a heart, poor fellow, as ever breathed, and when he saw the embarrassment his im

prudent thoughtlessness had caused, he started off, saying he would no longer be a source of grief to us, and went to sea."

"To what part of the world? When did you hear from him?" asked Hester.

"We have never heard since," he whispered, turning away his face, so that Hester could not see it.

"Why, can that be Sam! wheeling down my luggage himself!" uttered Hester.

Mr. Halliwell looked towards the advancing truck. "Yes, it is Samuel," he quietly said, not seeming to feel the affair in the least.

"Samuel, how could you think of doing such a thing!" Hester exclaimed when he came up. "I told you to let the omnibus bring my boxes."

"The omnibus would have charged you a shilling, Aunt Hester," returned the boy, looking at her with a good-humoured smile on his bright face: "sixpence for the trunk, though it is small, and sixpence for the band-box. It has done me no harm."

"Well, Sam, as you have done it, and it can't be helped, there's the shilling for you."

"Oh no, indeed, Aunt Hester, I did not do it to get the shilling for myself. That would be cheating the company; but, of course, as you are my aunt, I could bring them free if I liked. I will not take it, thank you."

"Very well," said Hester, admiring the lad in her heart. "If young porters are too proud to accept shillings, I cannot help it."

"Better for him to be at this honest employment, though he is the descendant of a race of gentlemen, if it keeps him out of mischief, than go wrong through idleness, as George did," whispered Mr. Halliwell to his sister.

"Yes, yes, Alfred, it is better. What is Tom doing?"

"Thomas is in his uncle Zink's office."

"Articled?"

"Only as a clerk," sighed Mr. Halliwell. "He gets a trifle a week. We cannot place boys out as gentlemen, Hester, without premium, nowadays; and I have not got it to pay."

At the door of the Vicarage stood Emma and Annie, both lady-like girls, and one of them, Emma, extremely pretty. Though only attired in cheap alpaca dresses, they looked like the daughters of a gentleman. Archibald, the youngest child, was peeping out of the parlour.

"Now guess which is which," said Mr. Halliwell.

Hester looked at the smiling, blushing countenances of the two girls, and guessed wrongly. "That is Annie," she said, pointing to the pretty one, with the rich colour and merry eyes. Mr. Halliwell laughed.

"That is Emma. Take your aunt upstairs to your mamma, children."

Hester followed them to Mrs. Halliwell's bed-chamber. The room looked very nice: the curtains, sheets and dressing-cloths snowy white. Mrs. Halliwell was sitting up in bed, sewing, her thin face as white as the linen.

"Mamma, here is Aunt Hester."

The pink hectic flushed into her face at once, and her trembling hands let fall the work. Hester leaned over the bed and kissed her.

"You look ill, Mabel," she said, "but I have come to cure you."

"You have come to see me die," she whispered; and there was a resigned expression in her face which Hester had never before seen in it.

Hester took off her shawl and bonnet and sat down by her, and the two girls left the room, to get tea ready, by their mother's orders.

"How have you managed to get into this weak state?" inquired Hester.

Mrs. Halliwell did not answer immediately, but lay with her handkerchief pressed to her face—Hester thought to hide the tears.

"It has come on by degrees," she said; "I have had *so much* to bear. But I am not grumbling as I used to do," she hastily added, as an earnest, happy expression flitted over her countenance. "Oh, Hester! how I could have gone on for all those years without LIGHT coming to me, I cannot tell. Do you remember how I would abuse and despise Alfred for the way in which he would accept and welcome trouble, for that resigned, *trusting* spirit of his?"

Hester nodded.

"But it came to me also in God's own good time. I see things clearly now; I did not then. Trials, troubles as we call them, are sent to us in mercy, and accordingly as they are received, they are to us miseries or blessings. Alfred, in his submissive, trustful spirit, made them the former; *I* murmured and rebelled. But, as I say, light has come to me; and I can look back now on my life of care, and truthfully say I would not change its remembrance for that of an easier one."

"Then you are happy, Mabel?"

"Quite happy," she answered, with a movement of the hands which spoke perfect content. "When the conviction first stole upon me that I was declining, I could not have said so, on account of my children. For myself I had no regrets, for I had found my Saviour; but oh! to leave my children! To feel that I was going to be taken to a heavenly home, and that they—perhaps one, perhaps two—more—how could I tell?—might never come to it! that no mother would henceforth be with them, to be their guide, and whisper a warning, a word in season, or to pray for

them! And then a remorse came to me: that when they were young I might have done so much more than I did do, to turn their hearts and hopes heavenward. But all that anguish has passed—save for one of them—and I am content to leave them in the hands of HIM who has drawn me to Him, and will, I surely trust, in due course, draw them also."

"How long have you been ill?" inquired Hester.

"It is very, very long since I felt strong; but I have been visibly declining for nearly two years. There is not much the matter with me, even now, beyond want of strength."

"Have you much appetite?"

"Not now, and it has been very dainty throughout. Delicacies, niceties, I could have eaten; indeed, I used to crave for them with an intense longing: fowl, and tender cuts out of a joint of meat, beer and wine, and similar things. But of course we could not procure them, and our ordinary food I was unable to eat. I expect that has been the chief cause of my decline, a want of proper nourishment. Since it has been known that I am seriously ill, every one is very kind, sending me jellies and wine and tempting bits from their own table; but the craving for them has gone, and they do me no good. Did Alfred tell you about George?"

"Yes."

"Oh, if I could only see him! if I could only know where he is! if I could only have him with me for an hour, here, by my bedside, and charge him to struggle through life, bearing one end in view—to come to me *there* —it seems that I could die in peace!"

She had pointed her hand to the sky as she spoke, and Hester could not trust her voice to speak just then.

"Two years," she continued, "two whole years; and never

to have heard of him! whether he is dead or alive; whether he is in distress, in slavery; whether he is with companions who will lead him into all evil. Oh, Hester! and he was my first-born, my dearest child."

"He is in God's hands," whispered Hester. "And, Mabel, so are your cares."

"I know it, I know it. But for that knowledge I scarcely think I could bear the care and anxiety for him which presses on me. Oh, George! my boy, my boy! I often wish, Hester, he had gone before me, a child, as poor little David did."

"And so old Betty is dead," observed Hester, by way of diverting Mabel's sad thoughts.

"Betty is dead. There lies another of my regrets: I never appreciated her as I ought. She had so hard a life here, yet I made little effort to smooth things for her, but too often found fault and grumbled. She stopped with us, good faithful creature, as long as she could, faring hardly and never asking for her wages. She is better off now. Hester, tell me all the particulars about your ill-fated sister, Mrs. Goring. Alfred and I cannot understand her death yet."

"I will tell you to-morrow, Mabel, not this evening. It is a long tale. Were you not surprised at Amy's marriage?"

Mrs. Halliwell could not help smiling. "Indeed we were surprised at both of them. At him for choosing Amy, so meek and retiring, and at her for putting up with a husband who had a wooden leg. I do not see why they should not be very happy. The worst is Mrs. Copp's displeasure. Do you think she will ever be reconciled?"

"She is reconciled already," laughed Hester. "Have you not heard so from Amy? She went off to Liverpool in the height of displeasure; but, before the Captain and Amy had been at home a fortnight, who should arrive

there but Aunt Copp, with two chests of linen as a present, and a silver tea-pot."

"Then she is with them now?"

"And no doubt will be till Christmas," added Hester.

"Mamma," said Annie, looking in, "tea is ready. Are we to bring Aunt Hester's up with yours, or will she come down?"

"Bring it up," said Hester.

"No, no," interrupted Mrs. Halliwell. "I must not monopolize you entirely; what would Alfred say? Go down and have your tea with him, and come up to me again afterwards."

Before Hester had been many days at the Vicarage, it struck her that the two girls had some secret between them. Upon going into a room she more than once surprised them in a whispered conversation, and at the sight of her they had started from each other like detected criminals—their faces turned crimson. However, she attached little importance to it, imagining it to be some girlish matter. They had very little leisure. Since Betty died, Mr. and Mrs. Halliwell had kept no regular servant; a woman went for three or four hours a day to do the rough part of the household work, and Emma and Annie did the rest. All their spare time was occupied in crochet-work, which they did to sell. A shop at Camley (an aristocratic village three miles off) took it from them, and they earned a good bit of money between them, some weeks as much as eight or ten shillings. But they did not have it regularly, there was so much competition for that sort of work.

On the Wednesday week after Hester got there, she was sitting in Mrs. Halliwell's room, when Annie came in to ask something about the dinner.

"Where's Emma?" inquired Mrs. Halliwell.

"She is gone to Camley, mamma."

"To Camley! My dear, why does she not say when she is going? Your aunt would have liked the walk with her this fine morning. And why is it always Emma who goes to Camley? You should take it in turns, Annie. You ought to walk sometimes, confined as you are so much indoors."

Annie did not answer, but Hester noticed a very vivid blush rise to her face as she left the room hastily.

"It is a fine morning," observed Hester, "for so late in the year."

"I am sure a walk would do you good, Hester. If you put on your bonnet now, you will catch up Emma."

"I should not like to leave you for so long a time," said Hester.

"Oh, that's nonsense," returned Mabel, with a touch of her old, hasty manner. "You will be back in a couple of hours, and I shall not run away the while. Tell Emma, when you catch her up, that I do not approve of her always being the one to go to Camley and leaving poor Annie at home."

Hester was tempted to take the walk, for, excepting to church on Sunday, she had not been out since she arrived, and she felt that she wanted air. So she departed, and walked fast to overtake Emma; but she could not see her, and at length reached Camley. The shop where she expected her niece to be was readily found, and she entered it; but they said that Miss Halliwell had been gone nearly a quarter of an hour.

"How in the world can we have missed each other?" thought Hester. However, it was of no use deliberating and streaming about Camley; the only thing was to make the best of her way home again.

Accordingly, she turned back; but, in passing through the village, her eyes happened to wander to the windows over an opposite shop, where grocery, chandlery, brooms,

brushes and other miscellaneous articles were sold. Hester stopped involuntarily, for surely she saw Emma Halliwell's side face at that upstairs window! Though it was only for a moment, for the face disappeared behind the folds of the crimson curtain. Hester crossed the street, intending to knock at the private door and ask for her. But the thought that it might not be Emma caused her to waver; whoever it was wore no bonnet, and seemed to be quite at home; she remembered also that her nieces had said they had no acquaintances in Camley. So Hester passed on, and reached home. Emma had not returned. Hester said nothing, only that she had missed her. A full hour afterwards she saw her coming down the churchyard steps hurriedly, her face the colour of a peony. Hester ran and opened the door.

"Emma, you have been a long time," she remarked.

"The patterns were not ready," was Emma's prompt answer. "I had to wait. I thought they were going to keep me in the shop till night."

"There's something wrong here," thought Hester to herself. But she said nothing then—it was not a fitting opportunity to do so.

In the afternoon the equipage of the Reverend George Dewisson came prancing up to the churchyard steps, and the Reverend George alighted from it, walked down them and knocked at the Vicarage door. A rare honour; for since his induction to that rich living he had grown more stiff and unsociable than ever. Lord Seaford had died within two years of his appointment, and the Reverend George had then married. His wife was a lady in her own right, as the saying is; old and grand and sour; she was one of five sisters, who were all as poor as the poorest mouse in St. Paul's Church; but he had been caught by the title and had married her.

Mr. Halliwell and his sister received him, and in the course of conversation the former remarked that Lady Lavinia never came now to see Mrs. Halliwell.

"There are—aw" (the Reverend George had talked in a constrained manner when he was curate, and pomposity was added to it now)—"certain rules of society, which—aw—Lady Lavinia, from her position, is especially obliged not to—aw—transgress. She requested me to state, should the subject be led to by you, that she intended no disrespect to—aw—*Mrs. Halliwell* by abstaining from calling."

The words, and the peculiar stress upon his wife's name, puzzled Mr. Halliwell.

"But when—aw—a young lady (as, of course, a clergyman's daughter must be considered, be her pecuniary circumstances ever so unfavourable) gives herself up—or, I may say, in this case, give themselves up, to—aw—low company: to, in short, an appearance of—aw—bad conduct—it cannot be expected that Lady Lavinia can—aw—countenance the family."

Hester blushed for his bad feeling and vulgar words. If ever the temptation was strong upon her to tell the world how he had obtained his living, it was then. But she sat silent.

Mr. Halliwell's mouth opened with amazement. "Do you allude to my daughters?" he inquired.

"I am obliged to say I do. To—aw—the elder one especially."

"Why, what have they done?" he asked.

"Report says that they—at least—aw—one of them, is upon familiar terms, in—aw—a very familiar sense of the word indeed—with a man who lives at Camley. Some low musical fellow of the name of Lipscombe, who gets his living by—aw—fiddling and such things."

Hester's heart went pit-a-pat against her side, for she

remembered the vision of Emma's head that very morning, and her deliberate untruth afterwards. She listened to further particulars—rumours, he called them—entered into by Mr. Dewisson, and when that gentleman left she laid her hand on her brother to detain him (for he was hastening nervously into the room where the two girls were seated at their crochet) and spoke calmly.

"There must be some mistake in this, Alfred. Leave me to penetrate it; the children will be confused and alarmed if you question them. You are looking now white with apprehension. Go out on your afternoon parish round; and, above all, say nothing to Mabel."

Hester took her knitting into the other parlour and sat down by her nieces, who had their heads together, as usual, whispering.

"Which of you two ladies is it," she began in a careless tone, "who is upon intimate terms with Lipscombe, the music-master?"

Annie gave a half scream, looked at Emma, and began to tremble violently. She was by far the more excitable and the more sensitive of the two. Emma bent her head lower over her work, and her very neck grew scarlet. Neither spoke.

"Annie," said her aunt, thinking she would question the one whom she suspected to be the least guilty, "are you upon familiar terms of friendship with this Mr. Lipscombe?"

She burst into tears. "No," she sobbed; "indeed I am not. I have seen very little of him."

"Have you not occasionally gone to his lodgings—where he lives alone? That is very pretty, I think, for a young lady."

"I have never been inside his door," cried Annie, earnestly. "It is not my fault."

"What is not your fault?"

"Good gracious, aunt," interrupted Emma, testily, "if we have spoken, once in a way, with Mr. Lipscombe, where's the harm of it? Papa and mamma would like to keep us curbed up, like mice in a trap. Don't make yourself such a simpleton, Annie: there's nothing for *you* to sob over."

"There is a great deal of harm," returned Hester in stern tones, for the girl's careless words provoked her. "A communication has been made to your father that you have acted so as to raise serious reports against your fair name. It is not possible that you, a clergyman's daughter, carefully brought up, can have conducted yourself so as to deserve them."

"Oh, Emma," implored Annie, in deep agitation, "tell the truth. You know it cannot be hidden always. Tell Aunt Hester: perhaps she will break it to papa."

Hester's flesh was creeping all over: she hardly knew what dreadful thing to fear. It did not creep less at Emma's next words.

"*Will* you stand between me and papa's anger, Aunt Hester? I know it is very bad, but it is done."

"What is done?" breathed Hester, hardly able to get the words from her dry lips.

"I am married," she whispered.

Hester sprang from her chair. "Married!" But the word was a relief in that moment of wretched suspense. Then came the thought, was she wilfully deceiving her, or was she deceiving herself? For how could a girl go through the ceremony of marriage in a country place without her father being cognisant of it, and he a clergyman?

"Do you doubt me?" returned Emma, in answer to her aunt's confused words, and there was a touch of scorn in her tone as she spoke. "We were married in Chelsborough two months ago, two months this very day. Annie can tell you

so. Here is the ring," she added, taking it from the bosom of her dress.

Annie only sobbed; she was in great distress; far more agitated than her culpable sister.

"How could you lend yourself to it, Annie?" her aunt indignantly asked her. "To join in concealing so serious a step from your parents, will be a reproach to you all your after-life."

"I did not know it, aunt," answered Annie, the tears raining from her eyes. "Emma did not tell me for three or four days afterwards. It would have looked like ill-nature to betray her then, when it was too late to prevent it. I have never had a moment's peace since, from terror of its coming out."

"Which church were you married at, in Chelsborough?" inquired Hester.

"At no church. We were married at the registrar's office."

"Then it is no marriage at all! It will not stand good," breathlessly uttered Hester.

"Yes, it will," said Emma. "Marriage before the registrar is as legal as marriage in a church. I have heard papa himself confess it to be so."

"Marriage before the registrar, indeed!" cried her aunt, in her vexation; "I should be ashamed to think it legal. A barefaced, irreverent way of doing things! You might just as well have jumped over a broomstick. Annie, who is this man? Will you answer me?"

"He teaches music, and he plays at the Chelsborough philharmonic concerts, and copies music; anything in that way. He has the teaching at Camley; but that is not much."

"And earns what?" retorted Hester. "Fifty pounds a year?"

"More than that, I believe. But still he is too poor to have asked openly for Emma."

"Too poor! Yet you have wilfully run your head into this imprudent marriage, Emma—this noose of sorrow!"

"Anyway, I shall be better off than being at home," was Emma's answer: and it struck her aunt that her defiance of manner was only assumed to conceal her desperate uneasiness. "It is nothing, here, but worry and privation; work, work, work, from morning till night."

"How did you become acquainted with him?"

"We used to meet him on our road to Camley, and he took to bowing as he passed us. One day—Annie was not with me—it came on to rain hard, and he spoke, and offered me his umbrella, and walked without himself. We got talking of music. I told him how passionately fond I was of it; that I believed I had a great talent for it, but papa and mamma had never had me taught. Oh, Aunt Hester," she continued in an altered voice, "when I reflect that I might have been trained in that delightful science, instead of passing my days at this horrid employment, or in domestic drudgery, I feel rebellious against every one! I know I might be earning a good living now, for us all, if they had only let me learn."

Hester could not but feel there was some reason in what she said, for Emma had inherited her mother's talent for music, but in a more eminent degree, and her voice was remarkably fine.

"To go back to your explanation," said Hester, coldly: "what was the next move, after the day of the umbrella?"

"I met him again; I was always meeting him; more frequently, it seems, when Annie was not with me, than when she was. Then he took me to a concert at the Camley Tea-gardens, and——"

"Took you *where?*" uttered Hester, in horrified tones.

They are respectable, Aunt Hester," interrupted Annie. "Very decent people go to them; not quite the gentry, perhaps. They are about a mile beyond Camley."

"Of course they are respectable," returned Emma, "quite enough so. And I should not care where I went, to hear good music. I went to two of them. He gave me the tickets."

"And Annie?"

"Not Annie. She was afraid to venture."

"But how did you account for your absence, at home?" asked her aunt.

Emma hung her head. "I was obliged to make excuses. They suspected nothing, and it was easily done."

"Wrong, wrong; all very wrong. And you, Emma, a clergyman's daughter, to have made one at a concert in low tea-gardens!"

"Oh, don't talk, please, about our being clergyman's daughters," retorted Emma, in a spirit of indignation. "Aunt, it is a misfortune that we are so; it is the falsest position any one can occupy. If we had been born in trade, we should not have had these detestable appearances to keep up, that mamma and Aunt Fanny were always harping upon. You must not do this, and you must not do that, because your papa's a clergyman and a gentleman! And if we had been born rich, we should have received a proper education, enjoyed amusements, and good clothes, and society. We may not associate with those beneath us; and our means (our dress, to go no further) have not allowed of our mixing with our equals, and those above us. We have been denied innocent recreation, for it could not be afforded. Our position has been a wretchedly false one, Aunt Hester, and when the temptation of getting out of it was laid in my way, I could not resist. I did strive: Annie knows I did: but it was too strong for me, that and the prospect

of living amongst music ; and I became Edgar Lipscombe's wife."

"You unfortunate child ?" uttered Hester, in her grief, "what is to become of you ? How are you to live ?"

"He made £80 last year," said Emma. "A great deal more, in proportion, for two of us, than papa's £150, with all its outgoings. Besides, he is teaching me music, and I shall soon be able to help him. It will not take *me* long to master the piano," she added, in a tone of conscious triumph. "We shall establish ourselves in some large town, perhaps London, and we shall succeed. I am not afraid: if you, dear Aunt Hester, will only be my mediator with papa and mamma now."

"I do not see much that I can do. The facts will bear no softening: rebellion, wilfulness, and deceit. Not to speak of the disgrace to a clergyman's daughter in making so disreputable a marriage."

"Cler— Now, pray, Aunt Hester, do not, I say, return to that. It is just rubbish, and nothing else ; sinful, false rubbish."

Emma's expressive word and tone reminded Hester of bygone years, when she had heard the same from her mother, upon very much the same topic. But Emma was much what Mabel had once been.

"If it is incumbent on a clergyman's family to maintain dignity and exclusiveness," continued Emma, "the Church should afford him pay accordingly. A clergyman's daughter, indeed ! I tell you I would rather have been born a blacksmith's—anything. Think of the miserable struggle life has been to papa and mamma ! It is sinful—I must speak out, Aunt Hester—it is a sinful system which condemns a clergyman to such toil and privation. Better be a Dissenting minister ; better be a Roman Catholic priest—almost better be a mechanic, labouring with your hands."

"Good patience, child!" uttered Hester, when she could give vent to her astonishment; "where have you learned such words—acquired such notions?"

"We have not gone through life with our senses closed, Aunt Hester; at least I have not: Annie is tamer, and puts up with things. The mortifications we have had to bear as your boasted 'clergyman's daughters' would have opened them, if nothing else had done so. I am glad that the step I have taken will be of some service to my poor father, as he will have now one less to keep."

CHAPTER XXVI.

A WANDERER'S RETURN.

THAT night, when all were gone to bed, Hester sat with her brother in the parlour and told him the truth. Never had she seen him so much excited, so much afflicted. Even his Christian spirit was not proof against the blow.

"Whose fault is this?" he exclaimed. "Can it be called mine? Apart from her own imprudence, her wilful conduct, do you see that blame lies with me and her mother?"

"No; the fault is her own. But *circumstances* have been against your children. That is where the real blame lies, and Emma knows it. She said to-day she had occupied a false position in life, and she is right."

It is a painful thing to see a man weep, as Hester witnessed it in her brother that night. For the moment, nature had her sway; his submissive resignation was forgotten, the bitter feeling, for years so patiently subdued, was given vent to, and his sense of injury burst forth as a mountain torrent.

"It is an accursed system; it must be such in the sight of God. Why do they leave me, and such as I, to toil and starve our lives out, and lavish their prodigal thousands upon others of our order, who are no better than we are, save in patronage? All the ills of my life have been brought upon me by this cruel poverty. My wife's illness

and early grave, the repression of my children's spirits, the blighting of their prospects, George's uncertain fate, and now this last and bitter blow! Look at my own incessant toil, my broken spirits and health! How dare they condemn us to a wearing life of labour, exact from us that we appear as gentlemen, and not give us the means to bring up and place out our children! Review what our life has been—Mabel's and mine——"

It is of no use to record all he said: his wrongs were strong upon him. But it may be that had those high in place and power heard his words, as Hester did, they would have deemed it incumbent on them to set about ameliorating the condition of poor clergymen. Hester gradually soothed him round to the difficulty immediately before him: Emma's unfortunate step. How should he act in it?

"It is done, and cannot be undone," Hester observed. "Scold her as much as you will—and she deserves it—but see how the best can be made of it. I suppose it *is* a legal marriage, as she asserts."

"I shall marry them again," replied Mr. Halliwell, in excitement. "No child of mine shall call herself married upon so irreverent a ceremony."

They sat far into the morning—Hester warning him, when they parted, not to say anything to Mabel that night. Could it have been kept from her entirely, it would have been well; but that was impossible.

Impossible it was found to be. For the following evening Archie managed to betray it to his mother. Poor little Archibald! he was the factotum of the family, running and waiting on all, his dearest recreation being to sit by his mother's bedside. Mrs. Halliwell happened to put a question to him about Emma, and the child's stammering voice and confused countenance betrayed that there was

something on foot of which she was not cognizant. She demanded to be told.

"I am afraid to tell," answered Archie.

"Archie! Afraid to tell *me!* Speak out, my boy."

"Oh, mamma! Aunt Hester said you were not to be told. I don't know it all myself; I only heard a little."

"You must repeat to me that little, Archie. I will inform your aunt Hester that I insisted upon knowing."

"Emma has done something very wrong, very disobedient. It is about the music-master at Camley. I don't know, but I think papa is going to marry her to him to-morrow."

Of course these mysterious words were enough to alarm Mrs. Halliwell, and Hester was obliged to break to her the particulars. They shook her pitiably.

"Alfred is going to remarry them," Hester said. "He has no option, unless to accept the marriage before the registrar in place of a better. Do not distress yourself, Mabel. It might have been worse."

"Worse!" she exclaimed, "how could it have been worse? Hester, what are you thinking of? The girls have been reared in firm principles. No, no; it is as bad as it can be."

"Alfred marries them to-morrow, and then she leaves with her husband. We sent for him this afternoon, and he came, very penitent. I never saw a man so cowed as he was before Alfred."

"And you intended to keep all this from me!" exclaimed Mrs. Halliwell.

"No," answered her sister-in-law; "how could we keep it from you when Emma was leaving? But we were seeking a favourable opportunity of breaking it to you."

"What do you say his name is?"

"Lipscombe. He is a mild, diffident young man, rather

good-looking, and really quite gentlemanlike: fonder of Emma than she deserves, naughty girl, but with not half her share of sense and firm resolution. Emma will be master and mistress too."

"Why did he not ask for her openly?"

"He wanted to do so, as it appears; but Emma, and Annie too, thought there would be no possibility of his obtaining your consent and Alfred's: that a clergyman's daughter (which, it seems, Emma hates the name of) would not be allowed to marry a poor music-master, struggling in his profession; and she would not let him ask."

Mrs. Halliwell clasped her white hands together, and lay with her eyes closed. "The same career of toil for her that I have had," she murmured, "perhaps worse. Yet what opportunity had our children of doing better?"

"Nay, Mabel, Emma and her husband may do well," said Hester, for she strove to make the best of it to the poor mother. "Both intend to put their shoulder to the wheel; Emma's talents are such as to make headway, and I have heard to-day that he is thought clever in his vocation. And there is one thing, Mabel, which really is a matter of congratulation—he is an excellently conducted man; there is not the least stain upon his character. All that might have been worse."

But still Mrs. Halliwell sighed and kept her eyes closed. "Send Emma up to me," she said; "and let me be alone with her."

Hester ran out, when tea was over, to buy some white satin ribbon to put on Emma and Annie's straw bonnets for the morrow, for she really did think it well to make the best of things, especially to the world. She was walking rapidly, having plenty to do that night indoors, when, in turning out of the milliner's shop, she came right in front of three people walking abreast, and recognized the

Reverend George Dewisson, his wife and sister, who were hurrying home to dinner. Perhaps the other two would have passed, but Miss Dewisson stopped. A regular old maid, now, a trifle older than Hester. She had never forgiven Mr. Halliwell for marrying Mabel Zink, or Mabel for marrying him, and the rumours touching their daughter had not been unwelcome to her.

"Is it true things are so bad that Mr. Halliwell is obliged to marry them?" she asked eagerly.

"They are married, unfortunately," replied Hester, turning her face away from the blaze of the gas-lamp. "They were married two months ago, before the registrar in Chelsborough. That is the greatest reproach which can be cast at my niece, and we feel it as a keen one."

"Married before the registrar!" echoed the Reverend George. "If that is only—aw—their own assertion, I should receive it with suspicion, and—aw—doubt."

"We have ascertained the fact to-day, sir," returned Hester. "You can do the same, if you please, for your own satisfaction."

"Why, we heard Mr. Halliwell was going to marry them to-morrow," exclaimed Miss Dewisson. "What stories people tell!"

"You heard correctly. Although legally a wife, my brother does not choose to let her go to her husband's home, really to enter upon her married career, unsanctioned by the rites of the Church."

"That's—aw—as it ought to be," interposed the Reverend George. "Marriage before the registrar may serve for—aw—Dissenters, and such people, but we don't recognize it."

"The affair—though of course most shocking and unbecoming—being less criminally bad than we had been led to suppose, you may acquaint Mrs. Halliwell that I shall

resume my occasional visits to her," quoth Lady Lavinia, in a haughty, patronizing voice and manner.

"I will deliver your message to her, ma'am," returned Hester, curtly, as she wished them good evening and hurried home.

Hester had been guilty of a piece of innocent subterfuge. Finding the affair of the intended marriage had got wind, she told every one, especially Tom and Sam, who were applied to as oracles by Chelson, that the time fixed for it was eleven o'clock. But it was at eight in the morning that Mr. Halliwell, stern and pale, stood, in his white surplice, inside the altar railings, and the wedding-party ranged themselves before him. By these means very few people were in church; otherwise there would not have been standing room, and it would have made an unpleasant crowd for Emma, under the circumstances.

It was not so despicable-looking a wedding-party after all. The bride and her sister were in neat blue and white checked silk dresses, presents from poor Mrs. Goring just before her death, and their straw bonnets and white ribbons looked fresh and well. Hester had lent Emma her white veil of real lace, which, by accident alone, she happened to have with her at Chelson. The boys, called at six in the morning, and informed of the actual hour, were there, dressed in their Sunday clothes, and there also was Mr. Zink, the graceless Tracy of former days. A successful lawyer he was now, as important, in his own esteem, as George Dewisson himself, but very poor, for early extravagance hampered him, and "fast" habits still kept him down. He was there to give Emma away. She and Annie both cried bitterly, Mr. Lipscombe was nervous and trembling, and the Reverend Mr. Halliwell read the service somewhat rapidly.

A noise in the church caused Hester to turn her head.

Some urchins with their school-books in their hands had come into the aisle, and Jim was driving them out. Jim, as they all still called him, though he had long ago been promoted to the office of sexton and gravedigger. Hester's attention was attracted by a young man not far behind, whose gaze was fixed on the wedding-party with remarkable intensity. One arm was clasping a pillar, and he leaned forward, with—if Hester saw clearly—tears in his eyes. He wore a rough sort of cloth jacket and a blue shirt, like a sailor.

"Aunt Hester," whispered Archibald, who stood next her, and had also looked round at Jim's effort for order: "see that rough man by the pillar. He is so like George."

"Like who, Archie?

"George, who went to sea. But he was not brown, and his shoulders were not broad and big like that man's, and George was a boy, and that's a man. Oh!"

"Archie, what?" for the child had clasped her hand tightly.

"He is smiling at me. Aunt Hester, do you think it can really be George?

"I think it may be, Archie."

Just then the ceremony came to an end. The vicar was leaving the altar to lead the way to the vestry, when Archibald, forgetting awe and time and place in this new wonder, went up to his father, caught hold of his surplice, and spoke aloud.

"Papa—is that George?"

"Sir!" was Mr. Halliwell's stern and reproaching reply to the child.

"It is like George, that sailor by the pillar, and I think it is George, because he laughed at me." And there was no longer any doubt, for George, seeing he was recognized, came forward, and was clasped in his father's arms.

"Never comes a trial unaccompanied by a blessing," whispered Hester to her brother through her tears; "this will make up to Mabel for the shock of yesterday."

"Do you go and prepare her for it," he answered.

Mrs. Halliwell was half raised in bed, everything nice about her; for Emma and her husband were to pay her a visit before their departure, when Hester entered the chamber.

"Is it over? Are they married?" she asked.

"Yes," said Hester; "but I will tell you about it when I have spoken of something else. Mabel, I have just made a remark to Alfred—that no trial ever comes unattended by a blessing. You had a great trial to bear yesterday; there is comfort in store for you to-day."

"In knowing that she is married—I mean according to religious rites? Poor Emma!"

"Not that: something greater. Of all earthly blessings that God can send to you, think which you would best love to receive. You have a great surprise at hand."

"The greatest would be to see—oh, Hester! can it be? Is he come?"

"Yes, Mabel dear: George is come; and is here; and waiting to come up to you."

She broke into sobs, and cried like a child.

Emma, with her husband, received her mother's blessing, little thinking it would be the last; and they departed in a fly for Camley. George did not leave his mother's bedside till evening. It was dusk when he came out of the room: for the last hour they had been alone together. Hester, who was in the opposite chamber, saw him, and called him in. He sat down on a low chair, and leaned his head against the bed-post, sobbing.

"Come, George," she said, after letting him give way to it for awhile; "cheer up. Be more of a man."

"I shall never see her again," he said; "never, never."

"That, probably, depends upon the length of your next voyage," returned his aunt.

"No; it does not. If I were to remain, I am quite sure that very, very shortly I should not see her either. In a day or two she will be gone."

"You are mistaken, George. She has been like this a long time."

"Aunt Hester, I think we sailors detect approaching death quicker than landsmen. I have seen instances of it since I have been away. It is on mamma's face to-night, if ever I saw it."

"My dear, we will not discuss it. I believe your fears mislead you. When must you go?"

"To-night. But if I start at twelve it will do. Or," he added, as if in doubt, "say at one. I could catch it up."

"So soon! What port are you in?"

He mentioned one within a day's walking of Chelson. "I had only leave for a day and two nights," he continued, "and must get back before midday to-morrow. It ought to be before eight o'clock; but I'll risk it. I walked here in the night."

"George, the sea is a hard life?"

"Hard!—So hard that I will not describe it to you, Aunt Hester. And I am on a hard ship, in a bad service."

"I am sorry to hear it, my poor boy."

"The next two years may prove better than the two last. At any rate, they can't be worse."

"And what at the end of the two years?"

"Then I can pass my examination for officer, before the Board, and shall look out for a better ship."

"George, is this the life you would have chosen?"

He almost shuddered. "No. Some like it by nature: I do not, even with use."

"Yet you must remain in it?"

"I shall remain in it. When once a fellow has been to sea for two years, no one on land would give him employment. I shall get along, aunt, in time. It will be different when I am first officer, or captain: I shall like it well enough then."

"George," said Hester, laying her hands on his two shoulders, "in all callings of life there are hardships, and there are blessings. Our care must be to fulfil our duty, whatever it may be."

He nodded.

"Our duty to our fellow-creatures in the daily concerns of life, as well as our duty to God. Always bearing in mind THE END, and living for it."

"Aunt Hester," he answered, somewhat impatiently, as if not caring to hear from her the precepts he had just listened to from more sacred lips, "I have promised my mother to do my best *for* the end; and I will strive to do it."

Hester took a candle, and turned away to go into Mrs. Halliwell's room, but George spoke to stop her: "Mamma said she would be alone for awhile." Nevertheless, Hester thought she would go in.

She was lying with her eyes closed, but they opened as Hester approached the bed. Her countenance was full of peace—tranquil, entire peace. But—was there a change in it? or was it the shadow thrown by the candle? Involuntarily Hester thought of George's words. "Mabel," she said, in indifferent tones, not to alarm her, "do you feel worse?"

"No; I feel better. But I think I am going."

"Oh, Mabel!"

"I was permitted to last till my dearest boy came home: whithersoever we turn, Hester, mercy follows us: and now

I can depart in perfect peace. If God's guiding care were not over him, He would not have brought him here to receive my dying admonitions; and I am content now to leave him in His hands—oh, so content!—for I know that we shall meet joyfully, all meet, at the Last Day."

Hester ran downstairs. She sent Archie in haste for Mr. Jessup, and then for her brother, who was attending a vestry meeting. Mr. Jessup could do nothing: he thought she was departing, but was not certain. Mabel was certain of it herself, and Mr. Halliwell went down to prepare the sacrament.

They assembled in her room: the vicar, Hester, and Annie. Annie brought word that Jim was sobbing in the kitchen, and hoping that he might see his mistress once more, so they called him up, and Mabel smiled and held out her hand to him. Poor Jim took it, and only sobbed the more. But there was something Mabel evidently wanted still, as was proved by her anxious glances towards the door. Hester understood them, and, after a minute's hesitating communing with herself, went in search of George.

He was still in the opposite chamber, sitting in the dark, where Hester had left him. "George," she gravely said, "we are going to receive the Holy Communion with your mother. Dare you join in it?"

"Oh, Aunt Hester! I am not good enough."

"I can see that she is watching for you—your presence there would be her greatest comfort."

"We sailors do so many things that are not right, Aunt Hester: we swear, and do many other wicked things."

"As I fear too many do who are not sailors; and the very best of us are but bad. George," she continued, "none can decide this question but yourself. You no doubt do daily what is wrong, what are sins in the sight of God. But you are conscious now that they are sins."

"Oh yes!"

"And are you truly sorry for them, and hope that you may be pardoned for them? Above all, do you earnestly wish that you could be kept from committing these sins, and that you might lead a better life?"

"I do earnestly wish it. I have been thinking over, in the dark here, all the sorrow I have caused her, and my heart is ready to break for it. I wish I could be better: more like her."

"Well, George, you know what we must do, and Who we must go to, to be made better," was Hester's gentle answer. "I will leave you here for a few minutes by yourself, and then I think—yes, I do think—that you may venture to come in and join us. In the hope, you know, George, darling, that it may give you strength to lead a better life, and to give comfort to your mother. We will wait a few minutes, and if you feel that you can come, do so."

Hester returned to the sick chamber, and soon George came stealing in. Mrs. Halliwell had held out her hand, with a pleased countenance, to Jim, but oh! the joyous grasp, the illumined countenance, with which she greeted George. She drew him close to her bedside, and held his hand. The clergman went up to him.

"Do you feel you may be a partaker of this!" he whispered in serious tones.

The colour flew to George's face at the question, and he glanced at his aunt Hester.

"Speak for yourself, George," she said. "According to the dictates of your conscience."

"I think I may, father," was the hesitating answer. "I hope I may."

Without another word the minister proceeded to his duty, reading some of the service for the visitation of the sick,

and then administering the Holy Sacrament. At its conclusion, Jim returned downstairs, sobbing still—he was a simple, affectionate-hearted servant—and the three boys came up—Thomas, Samuel, and Archibald. Hester has never repented of the part she took with regard to the sailor that night, and she believes it was acceptable to One higher than we are.

They gathered round Mrs. Halliwell's bed, and watched her leaving them. One hand still clasped George's, the other had sought her husband's. Poor little Archibald, frightened and tearful, had pushed himself in underneath his father's arm, next to his mother. Her death was one of peace, and so easy that none knew the exact time of the soul's departure. It was a little past twelve.

At one, George left. After he had taken his farewell, Hester went and opened the house door for him, and watched him across the dark churchyard. He flung himself down on the opposite steps, and gave way to his agony of grief, suppressed before the rest. Alas for the trials of life! How bitter at times they are to bear!

Hester remained for the funeral. The Reverend George Dewisson officiated, and a great number of persons attended it unasked. Half the houses in Chelson were closed, for if Mr. and Mrs. Halliwell were poor, they were widely respected. On the Monday following, Hester left for London.

"God bless you, Alfred," she said, at parting. "I say to you, as I said to George, bear on to the end. A few more struggles, a little more endurance, and it will cease for ever.'

"Hester," he whispered, as he wrung her hand in his with a painful pressure, "forget what I said that night. I was wrong to give way: but the moment's sore anguish betrayed me. I beseech you forget it."

"And do you forget it, too," answered Hester, "for it is not worth remembering. It was no great crime, Alfred."

"Sufficiently great to need repentance. Fare you well, Hester."

And thus she left him to his hard labour and his discouraging poverty. "But I declare," cried Hester, as she took her last look at the damp Vicarage, and the omnibus whirled her, in its course, past the luxurious residence of George Dewisson, "I declare that such a state of things is a disgrace to England's Established Church: that the wealth lavished upon some of its members, the wretched poverty of others, is a shame and a sin, and I will declare it to be so as long as the system shall exist, though the whole bench of bishops should convene a court and hang me for it."

BOOK THE TENTH.

CHAPTER XXVII.

DR. GORING'S SECOND WIFE.

Soon after Hester's return home the school broke up for the Christmas holidays, and Hester departed for Middlebury, according to her agreement. As the account of Mrs. Goring's mysterious death was given in Hester's own words, it may be as well to give this short sequel to it in them also.

I had promised to go down to Dr. Goring's at Christmas, and I did so, getting there for Christmas Day. Matthew and Alfred had come home for their holidays, and were well, careless, and happy, as it is fitting schoolboys should be. Mary had grown, and was much improved, promising to be as nice-looking as her poor mother. As to my brother-in-law, he was quite himself again; had recovered his spirits, and laughed and talked as before. These gay natures soon forget loss and sorrow; and perhaps it is best they should do so. One thing I was glad to find—that he had been prudent in his expenditure, and was paying off his debts. Some shares, which he held in a public company, had suddenly risen to a high premium: he had been wise enough to take the opportunity of selling out, and had

realized five or six hundred pounds by it. This assisted him well.

One morning, as we were seated at breakfast, the conversation turned upon a friend of Dr. Goring's, a schoolmaster, who resided in Middlebury. He had been a widower some years, but was now going to be married again to a pretty but portionless girl, and the town said it was quite a "love match."

"I did not think he would have been such a fool," observed Dr. Goring.

"In what way?" I asked

"When a man marries in youth he commonly marries for love, and that's as it should be; but when he gets to middle age, and wants a second wife, he ought to look out for money. Substance, not romance, should be the motto then."

Somehow I was pleased to hear Matthew say that, but I did not stay to ask myself why I was so. And just then the surgery boy brought in a note.

It was from a Mrs. Poyntz, asking him to call upon her in the course of the day, as she was not well. Captain and Mrs. Poyntz resided about a mile from the town, and their name brought to my mind the Clutterbucks, old friends of mine, who lived in a farm-house close to them. They were quite old-fashioned gentle-people, of the best type of the yeomanry of those days; a type that has now almost died out. I had not seen these friends for nearly four years, and I began to think, as I sat at my work, that I would go and call upon them. It was a sharp, frosty morning, bright and cold; the two boys had gone out to slide, and I proposed it to Mary.

We found them at home, Mrs. Clutterbuck in the kitchen making pork-pies, a duty she would never relegate to any of her servants. How well I remembered the well-appointed,

roomy old kitchen, far more artistic and picturesque than a modern drawing-room, where I had once, when I was a young girl, as fond of frolic as the best of them, revelled in all the quiet delights of a harvest-home. Care had not come upon me then. They hospitably wanted us to stay the day, but we had arranged to return home, and they reluctantly bid us good-bye.

It was after one when we left them, and we set off rapidly, for we dined at two. As we turned into the high-road from the lane (Clutterbuck's Lane it was commonly called, because it led to nothing but their house), I saw, about a hundred yards before us, Dr. Goring, walking towards Middlebury, by the side of a lady.

"There's your father, Mary!" I exclaimed. "He has been up to Mrs. Poyntz. I wonder who is with him?"

"It is Miss Howard," replied my niece.

I protest that a cold chill ran through me, from head to foot, when I heard the name. How came *she* to be walking with Matthew Goring?

"Does Miss Howard live in Middlebury?" I asked, when I recovered myself. For, truth to say, I had never once introduced her name since I came down; I disliked it too much. "When she left us, Mary, she was negotiating for a situation in London."

"Yes, but she did not take it," replied Mary. "She has been in Middlebury ever since, staying at her aunt's."

"Sly cat!" I'm afraid I groaned to myself. "She has her eye upon *him*, as sure as my name's Hester Halliwell, and she stays in Middlebury to catch him. What does she do?" I questioned aloud.

"She goes out as daily governess," said Mary. "People say she and her aunt quarrel a good deal."

I went along at a quick pace to come up with them. For I did not like Mary to see her father bending to look

into that false face, with every sentence he spoke, as if he were—courting. The word must come, though I hate to write it.

Dr. Goring was surprised to see us: his countenance betrayed it. *She* did not seem in the least discomposed, but greeted us with a flow of words in her modulated voice.

"We shall be late for dinner, Matthew," I observed; "we had better get on."

He drew out his watch and looked at it. "Not at all late," he said. "It is only half-past one."

He did not seem inclined to walk faster, or to quit her side, and I did not choose to leave him in her society. So we slackened our pace to theirs; and thus it happened that we were seen walking into Middlebury, side by side with that woman, who may have been the author of Mary Goring's death.

She turned off to her aunt's before we reached our street, and then I asked my brother-in-law what brought him walking with Miss Howard.

"I overtook her as I was returning from Mrs. Poyntz," he replied, "just before you came up with us."

I could not say anything to this, for I had no right to dictate to Matthew Goring whom he should, or should not, join in a walk and talk to; so I held my peace. But I know I was very cross at the dinner-table afterwards, scolding Alfred for upsetting the gravy upon the table-cloth—and the next minute I myself upset some wine.

When the holidays had expired, Matthew and Alfred went back to school, and I returned home. I did not go down again at Midsummer, for a pupil from India, of whom we had entire charge, was falling into delicate health, and the doctors advised the seaside for her. So my sister Lucy, who also wanted a change, accompanied her to Ramsgate with Frances, and I stayed at home to take care of the

house and the other pupils, five or six of whom generally remained the holidays with us.

We had resumed school about a fortnight, when I received a letter from Middlebury, from Mrs. Tom Halliwell. The following passage was in it: "Rumour says that Dr. Goring is about to be married again, to his children's former governess, Miss Howard."

Had a serpent stung me, I do not think it could have injured me as did those startling words. They were as I have quoted them, "*Rumour* says," but I instantly felt a deep, prophetic conviction within me that Charlotte Howard would inevitably be Matthew Goring's second wife. Could I do anything to prevent it? What *was* to be done? It was a union that ought not to be—I felt that, in my heart of hearts: a union from which no good could come.

"Lucy," I said to my sister, after tormenting myself for four and twenty mortal hours, neglecting my occupations by day, and tossing restlessly on my bed at night, "Lucy, I have made up my mind to go to Middlebury."

"But think of the inconvenience, just as school has begun, and with several fresh pupils!" she urged. "If Matthew Goring is so obstinately soft as to go and marry that Miss Howard, of all people in the world, I should even leave him to do it and to reap the consequences."

"So should I, if it only affected himself," was my answer. "But to give *that* woman authority over Mary's children! I shall start by to-morrow's train, Lucy, and you must manage as well as you can for a few days without me."

If I could have foreseen that that "few days" would be as many weeks!

I did not send word I was coming, but went in and surprised them: pouncing upon my brother-in-law in his surgery. It was getting towards seven o'clock when I

reached the house and astonished Susan. She said Miss Mary had gone out to tea, but her master was at home.

He was busy in his shirt-sleeves (it was an intensely hot day) over some chemical experiment. He had a glass of blue liquid in his hand, and his surprise was so great at seeing me, that, in putting it down, he let some of it fall.

"Why, Hester!" he exclaimed, "is it you or your ghost?"

"It is I, myself, Matthew," I said, "and very sorry I am to come. Do you know what has brought me?"

"The train, I suppose, and then the omnibus," he replied, with his old propensity for joking.

I sat down on a low wooden stool. There was nothing else at hand, for, of the two chairs, one had a globe of glass upon it, and the other a glass syringe as big as a rolling-pin. And I took off my bonnet, and laid it on the floor beside me.

"I had a letter from Mrs. Tom Halliwell a day or two ago," I began. "She told me a bit of news, Matthew, and I have come down to see if it can possibly be true, and, if so, to endeavour to stop it."

"Indeed!" he answered. But I saw, by the flush which came to his face, that he knew then, as well as I did, what I had to say: and I saw also that it *was* true; I saw it with a sinking heart.

"It is said, Matthew, that you are about to marry again."

"I am," he readily replied, as if, in the last minute, he had been nerving himself to face the subject boldly. "When a man is left alone with young children, as I am, Hester, it is a duty he owes them to give them a second mother."

"I don't see the obligation," I answered, "but we will not contend about that. If he does give them a second

mother, an imperative duty lies on him to give them a fitting one."

"Of course," he acquiesced, rather restlessly.

"Is Miss Howard a fitting mother for the children of your late wife, Mary Goring? Answer me that, Matthew."

"If I did not consider her so, I should not marry her," he replied, that hot flush on his face growing hotter.

"Oh, Matthew, I could not have believed it of you!" I said, wringing my hands, for my perplexity and sorrow were pressing heavily upon me. "You, with your good sense, with your once deep love for your wife! You did love her, Matthew."

"Better than I shall ever love another, Hester," was his impulsive answer; "with a different love. We do not marry a second wife—in our advancing age—with the feelings with which we wed a first. And no second wife need expect it."

"Well, I did not come all the way down here to talk sentiment," I grumbled. "The whole world lay before you to choose from; the whole world: *how* could you choose Charlotte Howard?"

"Why not choose her, as well as any one else?"

"*Why not choose her?*" I looked at him in astonishment. "Has she betwitched you, Matthew? Has she taken away your proper sense—thrown dust in your eyes—deadened all decency of feeling? A woman whose hands may be stained with the deepest known crime, who was probably the destroyer of Mary Goring!"

"Hester, hold your peace," he authoritatively interrupted, rising in anger from off the table, where he had perched himself. "I will not permit you to give utterance to ideas so disgraceful. How dare you couple Miss Howard's name with that of murder? If I were not sure that she is

innocent of this, and any other sin, do you think I would attempt to make her my wife ?"

"Do you remember what you once said about a man being a fool to marry, at your age, for love ?"

"No, I don't remember it," he doggedly replied. "But if you suppose I am over head and ears in love with Miss Howard, like a green schoolboy, you are mistaken. Though I think her a very charming young woman, there's many another I should like for my wife, just as well as Miss Howard."

"Then why on earth do you marry her ?"

"I hardly know how it came about, Hester. I have been with her a good deal lately—had got into *the habit* of being with her ; and one evening, in a merry mood, I popped the question. I declare to goodness, the words were no sooner out than I thought myself an idiot for my pains. Now you know as much about it as I do."

"You had better have popped it to me," I wrathfully answered, not caring what I said in my anger ; and Matthew laughed.

"Because you would not have taken advantage of it. Well, she did, and the thing's settled, so let us have done with it. But don't go fancying again that I'm spooney upon Miss Howard. When a man's turned forty," he went on, laughing, "it is a cut-up to his dignity to believe him susceptible of that kind of nonsense."

"How can you have been so dreadfully blind, Matthew ?" I ejaculated. "Blind to your own prospects and happiness ?"

"Do you mean as to her want of money ?"

"No. But a woman capable of flirting, as she did with you, in your wife's lifetime, will flirt with others when she is a wife herself."

"I think not," he answered "When once these women who are getting on in life marry, they sober and settle

down. It is only the sting of neglect that causes them to covet unlawful admiration."

"Matthew," I said, rising from my hard seat, "can *anything* I may say induce you to put aside this marriage? I ask it for your daughter Mary's sake."

"Nothing," he returned. "I have made up my mind about it, and the marriage will be carried out. My word and my honour are pledged."

"Had you any idea during my sister's lifetime—— Stay," interrupting myself, "I won't say that, for I do not think so ill of you; I will say at the period of Mary's death, and immediately after it, did the thought or wish cross your mind, then, of putting Miss Howard into her place?"

"Never; I assert it before Heaven!" he earnestly replied. "Indeed, I took rather an antipathy to Miss Howard just then, in consequence of what you said, Hester, that her propensity for flirting with me, or mine with her, or both, had given pain to Mary. If some one had flown away with Miss Howard into the moon, and kept her there, I'm sure it would not have caused me a regret or a passing thought."

"Yes; your conduct together embittered the concluding months of your wife's lifetime," I uttered to him; "and mark my words, Matthew Goring, *no good to either of you will come of this marriage.* I do not allude to any suspicion of a darker crime in saying this: let that lie between Miss Howard and her conscience; but when a woman has stepped between man and wife—has perseveringly set herself out to ruin their wedded happiness, and held at naught the work of God, who brought them together—no blessing can ever rest upon a future union of that husband and that false woman. No blessing, no luck, Matthew Goring, will attend yours with Charlotte Howard."

I left the surgery, and went about the house, and found he had been making preparations for his new wife. The drawing-room was newly papered and painted, also his bed and dressing-room. The old wardrobe, with one wing, had been taken out, and was replaced by a large, handsome new one; and there was a full-length swing-glass, and other new and expensive articles, which my poor sister had never possessed, and perhaps felt the want of. This is often the case with a second wife, I have observed—as if men would make up in attentions what they cannot give in love. As I was looking round the room, Susan came in to turn down the bed.

"You have some new furniture here, I see," was my observation to the girl.

"Yes, ma'am. What with the whitewashers, and painters, and paperers, and these new things coming in, the house has been like a fair for the last fortnight."

"And what is it all for, Susan?" I went on. Not that it is my general habit to gossip with servants.

"Why, ma'am, master has not said anything yet, either to me or to cook; but we can't be off hearing the reports in the town."

"Well, Susan, you will not gain a better mistress, let her be who she may, than your late one." The tears rose to the maid's eyes as I spoke, and I respected her for that little mark of feeling.

"She'll be no mistress of mine, ma'am," was her remark, uttered warmly. "I couldn't bear her when she lived here, and I'm sure I'm not going to stand and serve her when she's stuck up into my poor mistress's shoes. It's not my place to speak first to master, but when he tells us of the coming change, as, of course, he will do, I shall give warning. I wonder he has said nothing yet."

"Time enough, Susan, I suppose."

"So Dr. Goring seems to think," observed the girl; "but they say it is to be next week."

"What's to be next week?" I asked, in tones that must have startled Susan.

"My master's marriage, ma'am. Dr. Ashe's housemaid told me so this morning, and she heard her master and mistress talking of it when she waited at table yesterday. Dr. Ashe is going to take charge of master's patients while he is away on his wedding journey."

Susan left me to fetch home Jane. She had been placed (I forget whether I mentioned this) at a school in the town as daily boarder—going to it at nine in the morning, and not returning till bedtime. We had thought it better, when we were arranging matters after Mary's death. I went upstairs to see John, but the little fellow was in bed and asleep. Afterwards I went into the dining-room, and paced about it alone, indulging all my trouble.

What extraordinary infatuation could it be that possessed my brother-in-law? What did he see in Miss Howard to admire? I could not tell: I cannot tell to this day; or whether he saw anything. It is true she was always after him in the six months she had lived there (which had been six months too many), with her studied ways, her dark eyes, and her low, false voice. It is astonishing the amount of flirtation she got through in a day, with those apparently innocent manners and quiet voice; and he had ever been ready to meet her half-way. And my belief is, that if a blackamoor in petticoats, with yellow eyes and green teeth, were to hazard advances, some men would be found ready to make love to her. I once heard it remarked that Miss Howard was a "gentleman's beauty." Perhaps so; I don't know what their taste may be; but then, how was it that never a one had come forward to secure the beauty for his own property? And what did she really care for Dr.

Goring, although she did play herself and her charms off upon him? Not a bit more than she cared for me; for you may lay it down as an axiom that when a woman has lived half her span of life, her dream of love has long been over. But I think (and Heaven knows I don't judge by myself, though I am an old maid) that when a woman, possessing a vain, worldly disposition, and of no principle, coveting the admiration of the other sex, eager for their society—I think that when a woman of this restless, undesirable nature gets past her thirtieth year, without having been made (or perhaps sought as) a wife, she grows desperate, and cares nothing what havoc she makes in the happiness of a man and wife. As she cannot boast of a husband herself, she desires, at least, to obtain their admiration in the sight of the world. This had been my opinion twelve months before, when I first found out the intimacy between Dr. Goring and the governess, and this was my opinion of her still.

I asked Mary, when she came in, how it was I had been kept in ignorance of this contemplated marriage: that it was her duty to have written to me, if no one else did.

"How could I write what I was not sure of, Aunt Hester?" she answered, bursting into tears. "Papa has said nothing whatever to me. But I heard to-day that it is very near."

"So have I heard it, child," I said, walking up and down the room in my sorrow. "Don't grieve, Mary," I added, as she continued to sob. "This is a world full of trials and cares, and God sends them only to win our hearts to a better."

"Aunt Hester," she resumed, stifling her tears, "do I look *very* young?"

"Young!" I said; "why do you ask that question?"

"I wish to go out as governess in a school; anything of

that sort. I have been thinking much about it lately. Only I fear if people know I am only sixteen——"

"My dear," I interrupted, "what nonsense are you talking now?"

"*Don't* force me to live with her, Aunt Hester," she implored, with a sudden burst of feeling that astonished me. "I never can stay here with *her*, and call her 'mother.'"

"Do not fear, Mary," I soothingly said. "Before she puts her foot inside this house I take you out of it."

It was all settled that night with Dr. Goring. I sat up, tired as I was after my journey, until he came home at eleven o'clock, and I told him that from henceforth Mary and Jane must have their home with me and Lucy. "If you will pay for their board, Matthew, well and good, for you know we are not rich," I said; "but if not, we will still take them, and do without it."

"What ridiculous absurdity, Hester! The girls must remain at home. It is chiefly for their sakes that I am marrying."

"Is it?" I laconically answered; and then I related to him, word for word, the burst of feeling I had witnessed in Mary. He paced about the room, as I had previously done, with his hands in his pockets, and a contraction, as of pain, across his brow. With all his thoughtless folly, he did love his children.

"What is the matter with you all, that you should take this general antipathy to Miss Howard?" he peevishly broke forth.

"Instinct did it with me," I replied; "and a woman, whose conduct with their father caused uneasiness to their dear mother, can never be tolerated by any right-feeling children."

"There you are again, Hester, upon your ridiculous ropes! What could the children have seen of it?"

"Everything," I indignantly answered. "Do you suppose Mary, at her age, was blind and deaf? If I, unsuspicious as my nature is, saw so much in less than a month's sojourn, what must she have remarked who was in the midst of it the whole time?"

I need not pursue the conversation. I won him to reason about the children, and it was settled that Mary and Jane should be placed with me in London. John, who was beginning to go to a day-school, was to remain at home, and Matthew and Alfred would spend their holidays there as usual. Otherwise, the house would be free for his new wife. He offered liberal terms for the girls; he was ever open-hearted; and he also offered to pay for Frances, but I would not accept for more than two. His marriage was really fixed for the approaching week. I was for taking Mary and Jane from the town beforehand, but he said I would greatly oblige him by remaining during the fortnight he intended to be absent, as he did not care to leave the house and the young child entirely to the servants.

"Matthew," I said, "I would not stay in this house to see you bring home your bride if you paid me for it in gold and diamonds."

"I did not ask it, Hester. You shall receive intimation of my return, and can leave the day before." And I promised this.

We spoke about his pecuniary affairs. The quiet manner in which he had been living the last twelve months, with the proceeds of the shares I spoke of, had enabled him to pay off the chief of his debts, and the three thousand pounds accruing from his wife's death was intact, and placed out at good interest. He had also insured his own life for two thousand; so that, altogether, things were going on in a more prudent way than formerly. And for this I commended him.

Let no one say they *will*, or *will not*, do a thing, in this world. As St. James tells us, we should add, "If the Lord will." I had affirmed that I would not remain in Dr. Goring's house until he brought home his bride, and yet, when she did come home, there I was. Circumstances had forced me to remain.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MORE MYSTERY.

A FEW days after Dr. Goring's wedding (which you may be sure none of his family attended, though it took place in Middlebury, Miss Howard being married from her aunt's), the little lad, John, was attacked with sore throat and illness. It proved to be scarlet-fever, which was making its appearance in the town; but he had it very favourably, and I would not let Dr. Ashe write to apprise my brother-in-law, lest he should return, in haste, and bring *her* with him. Alas! the next one to be attacked was Mary. The symptoms, in her case, were more violent, and the fever mounted to her head rapidly. I could not leave her; and so, the evening of Matthew's return, there I was.

When the fly that brought them from the railway station stopped at the door, I happened to be crossing the hall, with a jug of lemonade in my hand for Mary. The man knocked and rang. Susan came flying along the passage to admit them, and I flew away up the stairs. I could not have met her, then, with words of welcome.

"Susan, Susan," I said, calling softly after the maid, "tell your master of Miss Mary's illness; that I am still here; and ask him to come to her room."

I heard the girl open the door; I heard some luggage placed in the hall, and I heard Miss Howard's voice,

speaking to Susan. I shut myself into Mary's room, and sitting down on a chair, burst into an agony of sobs, like a child.

I listened to his foot on the stairs, and I stood up and dried my eyes, and tried to look as if I were not crying. Matthew came in. He held out one hand to me in silence, as he turned to the bed where Mary lay.

He stood looking at her, and I stood looking at him. Was it really my brother-in-law, Matthew Goring? Never had I seen such a change in any one. He was thinner, paler, appeared worn and haggard, and had a dry nervous cough, which seemed to come from his throat. That a fortnight should have so altered any man was marvellous!

"Matthew," I said, going round the bed to where he stood, "what is it? You are ill."

"I have not been well ever since I left home," he answered shortly. "Never mind; it's nothing. I see Mary is very ill."

"Dangerously so, for the last few hours. Dr. Ashe has been anxious for you since midday."

"Send Susan for him, Hester. I must know exactly how she has been."

There was no necessity to send, for at that moment Dr. Ashe entered. After his departure, Susan came in, and said Mrs. Goring was waiting tea. "Mrs. Goring," not "my mistress." Poor, faithful Susan!

"Bring me a cup upstairs, Susan," said my brother-in-law. "I shall not leave my child. Hester, do you go down."

"I have taken tea hours ago," I replied: "and if not—— Matthew," I broke off, "I expected to have been gone, as you know, before this night, but I could not leave Mary——"

"Thank you, Hester, for remaining with her," he interrupted, warmly. "Thank you for all your kindness."

"But you must not ask me to meet your wife, as a friend and visitor. I cannot take my meals at table with her—*her* guest. Do not be vexed at what you will deem my prejudice, Matthew; I *cannot*. For the remainder of my stay, Susan will bring what little I want to this room, and I will take it here."

"As you will," he answered, but in so subdued and mournful a tone that it quite electrified me. Some great sorrow had evidently fallen on Dr. Goring.

He insisted on my going to bed that night, as I had been watching the previous one: he himself would sit up with Mary. It was late, and I was leaving the room to comply, when Mrs. Goring came swiftly up the stairs with a candle in her hand. *She* was looking well, younger, I thought, than she had been used to look—her mind, I suppose, was at rest now—and she was well dressed in a blue silk gown, and wore a thick gold chain of starry-looking links round her neck, and a watch at her side. His presents, of course, for she had possessed nothing of the sort when she lived there. She hesitated when she saw me, and made as if she would have come to Mary's room.

"Don't come in here, ma'am," I called out in my antipathy; "you'll catch the fever."

Dr. Goring heard, and, following me to the door, seconded what I said. "There's no reason for running into unnecessary danger, Charlotte. You will do well to keep out of this chamber;" and the tone of his voice sounded, to my ear, remarkably cold.

"I am not timid," she replied, "but I will do as you wish." And with that, she turned into their own room, and I heard her bell ring for Susan to undress her. When she was the governess she could undress herself, fast enough.

I could not sleep that night; I was very restless. And

once I stole out of my room and down the stairs, for I slept on the story above theirs, to look how all was going on with Mary.

The door was thrown open for the sake of air, and I bent forward and looked in. I remember the scene now, as it appeared in the feeble rays of the shaded night-lamp. Mary was lying, as before, unconscious and tossing with fever, and her father had bowed his head down upon the bolster beside her, near to where he sat, and was sobbing —violent, heavy sobs; his manly frame shaken with the intensity of his grief. I heard his low moans of anguish, and I saw him clasp his hands in deep, deep sorrow. And as I stood, taking another glance at him, before creeping back to my own room, an idea dawned over me that his extreme emotion was not caused so much by the danger of his child, as by some tender chord of remembrance of her mother, his once dear wife. Surely Matthew Goring was miraculously altered!

My niece Mary recovered, but weeks elapsed before she was able to leave her room; and I remained with her. Jane did not take it. All that time I never associated with Mrs. Goring, and, beyond some casual meetings on the stairs, did not see her. Susan, who consented to stay in the house as long as we did, brought my meals up to me, and Mary's when she was gaining strength. We heard that Mrs. Goring had anticipated, with much vain gratulation, the period when she should sit in her new drawing-room and receive the people who came to pay the wedding visits. If she had really done so, she was doomed to disappointment, for not a soul came near the place; they were afraid of the fever. But, as Mary grew better, her father grew worse: he seemed to have a continual fever on him; his cough, which had turned to a very bad one, harassed him much, and he was worn to a shadow. His spirits were

fearfully depressed; heavy sighs would burst from him; and Susan said that when at meals with Mrs. Goring he would sit and never speak unless she spoke to him. One morning, as I watched him panting in his chair, after one of these fits of coughing, and saw the perspiration on his pale forehead, and marked his laboured breathing, a terrible conviction forced itself upon me that he was not long for this world.

I made some excuse to Mary, ran upstairs, hurried on my shawl and bonnet, and went out to see Dr. Ashe. I found him at home. I told him the symptoms I had observed in my brother-in-law, his apparent excessive depression and illness since his return, and I spoke of the fear which had that very hour penetrated to my mind, and implored him to tell me what was the matter.

"I really have not the power to tell you, Miss Halliwell," was the reply. "I see how very ill Dr. Goring appears to be, but I cannot fathom the nature of his malady. He never speaks to me of it, though I meet him daily, as I am attending most of his patients for him. It's as much like a neglected cold as anything."

"Is it not a decline?"

"More a waste than a decline," was Dr. Ashe's rejoinder. "He loses flesh daily. And he certainly seems to have something weighing on his mind."

"And if he continues to lose flesh, and cough as he does, and spit blood——"

"Does he spit blood?" interrupted Dr. Ashe.

"Susan said so, the other morning. But to resume—if all these symptons go on, and cannot be mitigated, what is his life worth, Dr. Ashe?"

"Scarcely a month's purchase."

I dragged myself back again: sorrows seemed to be coming thick and threefold upon me. Susan was in Mary's

room when I entered it, and said her master was engaged in the dining-room with Mr. Stone, the lawyer.

"Susan says she thinks papa is making his will," whispered Mary.

"Oh, Miss Mary!" interposed the girl, "I did not quite say that. I said that Mr. Stone was writing, and master dictating to him, and that they were talking about wills when I took in the glass that master rang for."

It was an hour after that when we heard Mr. Stone leave; and my brother-in-law came upstairs. I opened the bedroom door, thinking he was coming in, but he turned into his own room, coughing violently. When the fit had passed away, I went across the passage and asked if I could get him anything.

"Nothing. Just step in," he said, pointing to a chair at his side; and down I sat. "Hester," he continued, "I don't think I shall be here long, and I am settling my worldly affairs. I trust you will not refuse to be the personal guardian of my children."

I could not answer at first; the words would not come; but I got them out at last.

"Do you mean that you have been making your will, Matthew?"

"Just so."

"I—hope"—I hesitated, and my heart was beating violently—"that you will not forget the claims of your children in the settlement of your property; that you will do righteous justice by them."

"Fear not, Hester," he whispered, clasping my hand with a hot, nervous pressure—"fear not that I shall forget the interests of Mary's children."

"Nor mine either, I trust," cried a soft, false voice, which made me start from my seat, and Dr. Goring looked round as Mrs. Goring stepped from the other side of the

bed, where she had been hidden by its curtains. "I am your wife now, Matthew, and as such have the first claim upon you."

"Hester! Mrs. Goring! justice shall be done to all," he utterly impressively. "So far as it lies in my power and ability to judge rightly."

"I beg your pardon, ma'am, for stepping inside here with my brother-in-law," I said, as I shot out of the room, "I certainly did not know you were in the chamber."

However, I had an opportunity of speaking to him later in the day, in the twilight, and he told me his plans for his children, but without hinting how his money was left. In every word he uttered there appeared to be a conviction that he should shortly be called from the scene.

"Matthew," I implored, "tell me what is the matter with you."

"I hardly know myself, Hester."

"You seem to have had some terrible grief upon you ever since your return."

"I have had a grief, a sorrow," he replied, "and I believe it has preyed upon my health. I know no other cause for my illness."

"You will surely tell me what it is?"

"I cannot tell you, Hester; or any one. It must be buried with me."

"If you would speak of it, it might no longer prey upon you."

"Probably not—if I could. But I can't. It is of a nature that—that—in short, it is what may not be spoken of. I was wrong to acknowledge it."

I was silent, lost in conjecture; and Dr. Goring resumed—

"One word more, Hester, which will probably be the last confidential one I shall ever speak to you. At the time of

my wife's death, I believe you suspected that I might have been the guilty person——"

"Never, Matthew," I interrupted; "never for a moment. I knew you too well. Where my suspicions did lie, I will not further allude to."

"I am glad you so far did me justice, but I doubted if you did then. I wished to assure you, Hester, on the faith of a dying man, who must soon appear before his Maker, that I was innocent of the crime, ignorant where to look for its perpetrator. Our babe, who had just died, was not more innocent and ignorant than I. I would have died myself to save her from it—I wish I had died in her stead. Mary—*my darling!*"

There was a low, passionate wail in his voice as he spoke the name. My heart was aching.

"It occurred to me as I lay awake last night, thinking—I mostly lie awake all night, Hester—that I would give you this, my dying asseveration, lest you should ever have doubted me."

"I never did, Matthew."

He would say no more, I mean as to the cause of his sorrow, and soon, very soon, before Mary was well enough to leave, there came a week of deep confusion and distress. Dr. Goring broke a blood-vessel; and ere Matthew and Alfred, who were telegraphed for, could arrive at home, he was gone. There was no time to send for Frances, so she, poor child, never saw her father, dead or alive, after her mother's death.

We buried him by the side of his wife, in the very grave over which he had been hissed not fifteen months before. Mrs. Goring insisted on following him to it—with unseemly ostentation, it appeared to me, for it was not the custom in Middlebury for ladies to attend funerals—walking herself next the body, and putting Matthew and Alfred behind her.

Never mind! never mind! it could not, then, bring her any nearer to his poor heart, or estrange them from it. After they came home Mr. Stone assembled us all in the drawing-room, and produced the will.

One thousand pounds was left to each of the three boys, and two thousand pounds between the three girls. The outstanding fees, when collected, were to be used in liquidation of claims against the estate, which they would considerably more than cover; and the furniture was to be sold, and its proceeds divided equally between the children. The other directions, for their education, etc., I need not mention, but only transcribe the clause which related to Mrs. Goring: "I give and bequeath to my wife, Charlotte Goring, the sum of ONE HUNDRED POUNDS sterling, in recompense of any pecuniary outlay she may have been put to in preparation for her marriage with me."

I stole a glance at her as Mr. Stone folded up the will. Her face was livid, as it had been once before in that room, when I had given her notice to quit her situation in the house as governess, and thought she was looking for something to hurl at me. And its expression—its evil expression! But it could do no harm now; and Matthew had, as I truly believed, made his will in the spirit of justice. Mr. Tom Halliwell and Dr. Ashe were the executors.

We went up to London before the sale of the furniture and effects, which was set about immediately, Mrs. Goring having taken herself from the house in dudgeon the day after the reading of the will. I took all the children with me, excepting Matthew and Alfred, who returned to school. I also took Susan, whom I had engaged as housemaid, for I had grown attached to the girl, and Lucy had written me that one of ours was leaving. As we travelled up, a lady from a distant part of the country, who sat in the same

carriage with us, happened to speak of a Miss Howard who had once been governess to her daughter. It was a singular coincidence, for I found it was the same Miss Howard, and an irresistible impulse came over me to ask why she parted with her.

"To tell you the plain fact," was the lady's rejoinder to me, laughing as she spoke, "Miss Howard had not been with me long when I found she began to think she had as much right to the society of my husband as I had. So I deemed it well to nip such an illusion in the bud, and discharged her without notice."

Then Matthew Goring had not been her first essay! But I never thought he had, by many. A painful query came into my mind: If *I* had discharged her without notice the day I proposed to him to do so, would those children, sitting opposite to me, now be orphans?

We afterwards heard that Miss Howard—that is, Mrs. Goring—went to reside at a small seaport town in Devonshire. But whether to exert her talents for a livelihood, or to gain one, we did not know. I once wished that she, and all such as she, might do penance in a white sheet; but she probably carries about with her a different penance—her conscience. If so, it is worse than the sheet, for it is a penance that can never leave her day or night.

For myself, I am growing sad and sorrowful, and the guardianship of the orphan children is a heavy charge. I daily pray that a greater power than mine may aid me in directing them, and I strive to lead them in the right path. My old habit of losing myself in remembrances and conjecture gains upon me. I weary myself with wondering what could have wrought that mysterious change in Dr. Goring after his second marriage, turning him against his recently chosen wife—chosen in such persistent obstinacy—and leading him to the grave. And his extraordinary will,

so full of marked slight towards her; what caused that? Mr. Stone told me, in the presence of the executors, that Dr. Goring gave him no explanation, but was short and peremptory as to that clause. An idea intrudes upon me sometimes: was it by a chance word, on her part, he learnt that she was indeed the wilful instrument of Mary's death—did his mysterious words to me point to that conclusion—and was it remorse for his own blind wilfulness in taking her to his heart that was preying upon him? But, if so, would he not have forthwith put her from him, there and then? It may be thought so. Would he not have brought her to justice? Unless, indeed, some chivalrous feeling towards a wife (for he had made her one) forbade it. Alas! if I weary myself with conjectures to the end of my life, I shall never fathom it. The whole matter, from the first to the last, is one of those things that must ever remain in mystery.

BOOK THE ELEVENTH.

CHAPTER XXIX.

OLD FACES.

THE family at Halliwell House were assembled in the drawing-room one Sunday afternoon in the Christmas holidays. Miss Halliwell was seated in her place at the head of the table, and Mary Goring was opposite to her, in her Aunt Lucy's seat, cutting up oranges for the children, the little Gorings and three or four pupils who were staying the holidays. They used to like to take dessert on a Sunday afternoon in the drawing-room, as it had a pleasant look-out upon the road. Lucy was suffering from one of her acute headaches, and sat near the fire in the old armchair of Mrs. Halliwell. It was very grand now, for the young ladies had worked a handsome covering for it. Mary was nearly eighteen ; a slender, graceful girl, far more beautiful than her ill-fated mother had been.

"There's such a pretty carriage at the gate, auntie," cried little John Goring, who was standing at the window.

"Not at our gate, child," said Hester ; for they rarely had visitors on a Sunday. Nevertheless, she turned in her chair and looked out.

It was certainly at their gate. A low, stylish landau, with glittering silver ornaments on the horses' harness. A lady in purple velvet and furs was in it, and the footman

was ringing at the gate. Presently Susan, Dr. Goring's old servant, came up and handed her mistress a card, saying the lady wished to know if she could speak with her.

"Give it to Miss Goring," said Hester, for her glasses were not at hand, and her eyes were growing rather dim for small print without them. "What does it say, Mary?"

"'Lady Elliot,'" answered Mary, reading from the card.

"Who is Lady Elliot?" exclaimed Lucy. "What can she want with us? Some mistake, perhaps."

"She asked for Miss Halliwell," said Susan. "Shall I show her up here, ma'am?"

"Yes, I suppose so," answered Hester. "But—with these cakes and oranges and glasses about—and the children! Show her into the dining-room, Susan."

Hester followed Susan downstairs, and the lady came in. A pale, delicate woman, with hair quite grey, though she did not look past forty.

"You have a young lady at school with you, a Miss Beale," she began, sitting down away from the fire, and removing the sable fur from her neck.

"Oh yes," answered Hester; "and a dear girl she is. She has been with us five years. But she is not here to-day, for she is spending a week with some relatives in Eaton Square. Captain and Mrs. Beale are in India."

"The relatives she is with are friends of mine," returned Lady Elliot; "and I have heard so pleasing an account of your establishment, of the comforts your young ladies enjoy, and the care bestowed on them, that I have been induced to think of placing my daughter with you."

"I am sure we feel much obliged to you," said Hester, in her own simple, courteous way. "If you should decide to entrust us with your daughter, we will do everything in our power for her happiness and welfare."

"She requires peculiar care; more care and attention

than others. But for extra trouble, I should of course expect to give extra remuneration."

"Is she not in good health?"

"Very good health, robust health; but"—Lady Elliot suddenly stopped, and then went on hurriedly—"the subject is naturally a painful one to me, and when I allude to it, I am apt to become agitated."

Hester looked at her in astonishment. Her pale cheeks had turned crimson, her breath was laboured, and her hand, as she played with the fur boa she held, was moving nervously. Hester did not know what to say, so sat silent.

"The fact is, her mind is not quite right. Her intellects——"

"Oh," Hester interrupted, speaking, in the surprise of the moment, more quickly than she might have done, "do not pain yourself by saying more. I fear, if the poor girl is like that, it would not be possible to receive her here."

"She is not insane," answered Lady Elliot; "you must not think I have mistaken your house for an asylum; but she is *silly*. Some days she is so rational that a stranger would not observe anything to be the matter with her; she will learn her lessons and sew, and practise—for by dint of perseverance we have managed to teach her a little music. Other days she will be childish and silly; but I can assure you there is no madness, no insanity; it is only a weakness of intellect."

"How old is she?"

"She is sixteen. The medical men have recently suggested that, were she placed at school with other girls, their companionship and example might tend to brighten her intellects. My husband is also of the same opinion. You know him by reputation, I presume?"

"No; I am not aware——"

"Sir Thomas Elliot, of Berkeley Square."

"Sir Thomas Elliot, the great physician!" echoed Hester. "Oh yes, I know him. Some months ago I took one of our pupils to him three or four times."

"He is my husband," returned Lady Elliot. "This child is our only daughter, and has been a source of great grief to us. When we first discovered her deficiency, as an infant, we believed the affliction to be much worse than it really was; we feared that she would be a hopeless idiot; at least I did so, for mothers, in such a case, can only look at the worst side. I thought, when the fatal truth burst upon us, that the shock, the horror, the grief would have killed me. I fear I loved the child too much, with a selfish, inordinate affection: three little daughters before her had died, one by one, rendering this last more ardently coveted, and, when it came, too fondly cherished. But that hopeless despair—for it was nothing less—has calmed down with years; and though I cannot say I am happy in my child, I am more so than I once thought I ever could be. Let me beg of you to receive her."

The further conversation need not be related, nor the arrangements that were entered into. Hester consented to receive Miss Elliot, upon the understanding that, should her peculiarities prove such as to draw the attention of the other pupils from their studies, she should at once leave.

The reader cannot have forgotten Tom Elliot, the random infirmary pupil, or Dr. Elliot, the physician. He had remained in Wexborough for some years, after we last saw him there, struggling on; then by the death of Mrs. Turnbull he and his wife were placed in affluent circumstances. Squire Turnbull had died early, and Mrs. Turnbull remained at Turnbull Park with William Elliot. The next to die was Lawyer Freer: he left the whole of his money to Mrs. Turnbull unconditionally, and when she died, not many years subsequently, she left her father's property to Dr. and

Mrs. Elliot, the greater portion of it to go to William at their death. An income of four hundred a year she secured absolutely to William, to become his when he came of age. The Elliots had then removed to London, and the tide of luck had set in for Dr. Elliot. How he got the name he could hardly have told himself, but he did get it, and rich patients flocked to him by dozens and by scores. The tide still went on, and one red-letter day Dr. Elliot was bade to kneel before her Majesty, and rose up Sir Thomas.

Lady Elliot left Halliwell House, and Hester went upstairs again. She told Lucy and Miss Goring the purport of her visit—at least, as much of it as she chose to tell before the children.

"What made Lady Elliot come this afternoon?" asked Lucy; for in those days Sunday calling was a very exceptional thing.

Hester did not know, for Lady Elliot had offered no explanation or apology. "There are some people who regard Sunday with little more reverence than week-days," Hester observed. "Perhaps Lady Elliot is one of them."

"I know what our nurse used to say—that business transacted on a Sunday would never prosper," interposed Frances Goring. "And Miss Howard, one day when she heard her——"

"Don't mention Miss Howard's name, Frances," interrupted Mary quickly; "you have been told of that several times."

Frances was apt to be forgetful. Besides, she did not comprehend the full horror which had been brought into the family by Miss Howard.

The second week after the school assembled, Miss Elliot came. Lady Elliot did not bring her: she was ill with a cold; but, to the great surprise of Hester and Lucy, Miss Graves did—Miss Graves who had formerly lodged with

them. They found she was residing with Lady Elliot as companion or attendant to her daughter. They scarcely knew her, she was looking so stout and well, but she had aged a great deal, and had taken to caps. They had been curious to see Miss Elliot, and found her a short, slight girl, with a small, simpering, vacant face, prominent blue eyes and dark hair.

Mary Goring linked Miss Elliot's arm within hers and led her into the schoolroom. The pupils were just going in to tea, and Miss Elliot, without the ceremony of being asked, sat down with them, making herself perfectly at home. Miss Graves took it in the dining-room with Hester and Lucy.

"Mrs. Archer is connected by marriage with Sir Thomas Elliot," she exclaimed, "and that is how I obtained the situation."

Her words did not strike particularly upon Hester's mind at the moment, and Miss Graves went on: "I told Lady Elliot how comfortable Clara would be with you, as soon as I heard she had an idea of placing her here—which is only recently, I fancy. The plan seems to have been made up all in a hurry."

"What a terrible affliction to have a child like Miss Elliot!" uttered Lucy.

"Terrible I believe it was to Lady Elliot in the first years, by all I can gather," answered Miss Graves. "She was not the rich Lady Elliot then that she is now; quite the contrary. Sir Thomas was only Dr. Elliot, an obscure country physician, little known or consulted; it is only within these few years that he has come out the great medical star, knighted by the Queen, and run after by every invalid. Many a physician, making his annual thousands, has had to struggle with an early career of poverty; and Thomas Elliot was one of them. You have not forgotten my

sister's husband, Miss Halliwell—the Reverend George Archer ?"

Had Hester forgotten him! A blush rose to her stupid old face—as she was wont to call it; though every one knew that it was anything but stupid, or old either—and they might have seen it through the ascending steam as she poured out the tea. Perhaps Lucy did. She quietly answered that she had not forgotten him.

"His mother and this Sir Thomas Elliot's father were sister and brother. He was a country clergyman."

Here was another recollection awakened. How often had Hester, in those old sunny days, heard George speak of his aunt and uncle Elliot! She had little thought, in her interviews with the renowned Sir Thomas Elliot, touching the health of one of her pupils, that she was speaking with the cousin of George Archer.

"And Tom Elliot—as Sir Thomas, stiff and stately as he is now, was then called—ran away with a young lady, and married her," proceeded Miss Graves. "Her father never forgave them, and left all his money to his eldest daughter; but she, when she died—she died young—bequeathed it to the Elliots. Since then Dr. Elliot has been a rising man."

"He must be an unusually clever man in his profession," remarked Lucy Halliwell. "Every one says so."

"Not he," answered Miss Graves; "not a whit more clever than others; only he is more fortunate than others. He has contrived to obtain the name—to be just now the fashionable physician of the day—and so crowds flock after him."

"Well, he must be a happy man, at any rate," repeated Lucy, "to see himself so successful after his early struggles."

"Not so fast there," rejoined Miss Graves, significantly; "they neither of them give me the idea of being too happy. Sir Thomas is a gloomy, austere man, who seems to have

no enjoyment in life; and no recreation, saving that of giving advice to patients. They say he was a wild, rattling young fellow in youth, whom every lady liked; but if so, he is strangely altered. And Lady Elliot looks and moves as if she had a continual load of care upon her. I say to myself sometimes that one might as well be in a convent as with them, for they will both sit in the room for hours and never speak. If it were not for Mr. William, I believe they would as soon be under the earth as above it."

"Who is Mr. William?"

"Their son."

"Their son?" repeated Hester. "I fancied Miss Elliot was an only child."

"Indeed, I don't know what they would do if they had only her," replied Miss Graves, who had not lost her loquacity, and seemed to speak of the Elliots' family affairs very freely. "Poor thing! what comfort can they find in one afflicted as she is? Instead of the fond pride that nature urges one to take in a child, there is rather a feeling of shame in a case like Clara Elliot's – a wish that, were it possible, we could hide such a child's very existence from the world. These, I am sure, are Lady Elliot's sentiments, and I fancy they would be mine. Believe me, Sir Thomas and Lady Elliot's hopes and love are confined to their son. They idolize him."

"Is he older or younger than his sister?"

"Several years older. He is nearly four and twenty. Ah! and he is worthy of their love. Very handsome, very fascinating, very good and affectionate; it is rare, indeed, one meets with one so deserving of praise as William Elliot."

"Does he follow his father's profession?"

"No. He is studying for the Bar; and report says, likely to shine in it. Not that there is any necessity for

William to work. His aunt, Mrs. Turnbull, left a portion of the property to him, and the rest at his parents' death ; and Sir Thomas must be putting by guineas by the thousand. But William is as industrious and anxious to succeed as if he had not a shilling in the world. If I had a son, or brother, like William Elliot, my pride in him would have no limit."

Just then Mary Goring came into the room, and in an undertone said something about Miss Singleton (who was the head teacher) and bread-and-butter. Hester did not hear what she said.

"Speak out, child," she said. "We need have no secrets from Miss Graves."

Still Mary rather hesitated. "It is not for the sake of the bread-and-butter Miss Singleton requested me to inquire," she spoke at length, blushing and looking at Miss Graves. "My aunt always desires that the girls may have as much as they can eat."

"Cut thin or thick, as they please," interrupted Lucy ; "but Miss Graves is no stranger to our arrangements. What is it you are saying, Mary ?"

"We only feared Miss Elliot might make herself ill," resumed Mary. "She——"

"What ! has she one of her eating fits upon her ?" sharply interrupted Miss Graves. "Is she eating a great deal ?"

"Fourteen slices since we began to count," replied Mary ; "and she chose the thick bread-and-butter. Miss Singleton thought it would be better to mention it before she let her take any more."

"That's Clara Elliot all over !" cried Miss Graves. "These eating fits, as we call them, do come over her now and then. You must limit her at these times to what is sufficient, Miss Halliwell."

"Perhaps she will not be limited," replied Hester.

"Oh yes, she will. You will find her extremely tractable. Control her with gentle authority, as you would a young child, and she will obey you. It is of no use to reason."

And so they found. And they got on pretty well with Clara Elliot. The worst days were her laughing ones. She would suddenly burst into a laugh, no one knew at what, and nothing could stop her; shrill, screaming, hearty laughter, one burst upon another, and she throwing herself backwards and forwards on her seat with the exertion. Laughing is contagious, and the first time it came on the whole school caught it, and fell into the roar; some went into hysterics, and others narrowly escaped convulsions. They had never had such a scene; the teachers even were affected, and the Misses Halliwell quite driven out of their self-possession. In future they led her instantly from the schoolroom, and let her have her laugh out away from the schoolgirls. Another annoying thing was about the pianos. Some one sat by her whilst she practised, generally Mary Goring, to whom she had taken a great fancy; but she would seize a sly opportunity of bringing both her hands down upon the keys with such force as to injure the wires—thump, thump, thump, as one uses a hammer, laughing in delight the whole time. The strength of her hands was astonishing, and they had two pianos damaged in one day. Lucy Halliwell and the teachers declared she used to be worse at the full and change of the moon, but Hester did not observe much difference. There was one thing in her favour—that she was perfectly truthful, always telling the straightforward truth fearlessly. No matter whether a fact told against her or for her, out it came, without any softening down. It would seem that the dread of displeasure, which causes other children to equivocate

when endeavouring to conceal a fault, was a feeling unknown to Clara Elliot.

On the third day of her residence at Halliwell House, Hester was seated in the drawing-room while Mary Goring took her lesson from the harp-master, when one of the maids announced Mr. William Elliot, and there entered one of the very handsomest young men Hester had ever seen. She did not admire men who are generally called handsome: big, showy, black-curled, prominent-featured, high complexioned, with loud voices, confident manners, and long moustachios. William Elliot was none of these: tall, he certainly was, and elegant, with features of great beauty, pale and quiet, a sweet look in his hazel eyes, and a pleasant voice and manner that attracted you whether you would or not. Hester did not know what there was in him to win her heart, but as he held out his hand to her and asked after his sister, it went over to him there and then. Mary continued her playing without notice, for it was the rule of the house that lessons were never interrupted by the entrance of visitors. She had, however, nearly finished.

Clara Elliot came in, giggling and jumping, pulled her brother's face down to kiss, and then flapped herself on the sofa, and began one of those senseless fits of laughing. The harp-master left just then, and Hester was glad of it. William Elliot, with a flush on his face, wound his arm about her waist.

"Clara! Clara!" he said, in kind but authoritative tones. "I want to talk to you. Do not laugh just now. Come and look at my new horse."

Her silly laugh subsided instantly. It was evident that her brother had a hold on her affections or her poor mind, and she suffered him to take her to the window. A groom, well mounted, was leading his young master's horse before the house.

"Oh, he is superb!" cried Clara, jumping again as soon as she saw the horse. "When did you buy him, William?"

"Only yesterday."

"Come and look," she uttered, darting across the room, and pulling forward Mary Goring, who was putting the music straight preparatory to leaving the drawing-room; "it's my brother's new horse. Do you know who she is?" she added, as soon as they reached the window—"she is my new sister. Her name's Mary."

He bowed slightly at this unceremonious introduction. Mary would have released herself, but the girl clasped her tightly with her strong hands.

A foolish fancy came over Hester, and perhaps it is foolish to relate it, but that can do neither harm nor good now. As they stood there side by side, William Elliot and Mary Goring, their profiles were turned towards Hester, and she was struck with a singular likeness between the two—the same beautiful cast of features, the drooping eyelid, the arched nostril, and the same sweet look in the mouth. It struck a chill to her heart. She hardly knew whether it was a presentiment or whether it was the breeze from the door, but the likeness and the chill were both there. She drove it away and forgot it: though she had too good cause to remember it afterwards: and she unwound Miss Elliot's arms and dismissed Mary.

"I hope Lady Elliot's cold is better," Hester said to her visitor.

"Thank you, yes. She talks of driving down to-morrow. I am glad you are happy, Clara," he continued, fondly stroking his sister's hair. "Do you think," he said in a low tone to Hester, as Clara flew off to another part of the room on some flighty errand, "that the change here promises to be of service to her?"

Hester said she could not give an opinion: Clara had

been with them too short a time; and presently William Elliot took his leave.

As he left the room, Hester turned to ring the bell, and in that moment Clara flung the window wide open and stretched herself dangerously out of it. Hester's heart was in her mouth—as the saying goes—and she sprang towards Clara, and managed to take the bell-pull with her.

"My dear," she said, "you must not lean out in this way; you might fall and kill yourself. Besides, it is too cold for the window to be opened to-day. Jack Frost is in the roads."

"I like Jack Frost," she answered. "And I never fall out of the window. I hold on."

Hester closed the window, taking Clara's hand in hers, and again came that silly laugh. It was at sight of her brother, who was going out at the gate. He looked up with those handsome eyes of his, and kissed his hand to her. The groom cantered up, and William Elliot prepared to mount.

She was like a young cat! Before Hester well knew she had drawn away her hand, she had left her side, flown downstairs and was out in the road, dancing round her brother's horse. The horse began dancing too. Clara only clapped her hands and danced the faster.

Susan rushed out to the gate, and Hester rushed down the stairs. But William Elliot was off his horse, quietly; quick as a flash of lightning had thrown the bridle to the groom, and had his arm around Clara, leading her in again. Hester met them at the hall door.

"You must not think me wanting in care," she panted, the fright having run away with her breath; "I was not prepared for her sudden movements. I shall be so in future."

"Her movements sometimes are sudden," he replied,

"but she never comes to harm. There is a Providence over her, Miss Halliwell, as there is over a child."

The next day, a very fine one, though cold, Miss Graves came down in the carriage. Lady Elliot's cold was worse, so she had sent her instead to take Clara for an airing. Clara pouted, and would not go. Miss Graves was at a nonplus.

"Lady Elliot will blame me, and say it was my fault," she said. "She made a point of her going out this bright day. Clara dear, we shall see such fine things as we go along; we shall see Punch and Judy. It is in full work, fife and drum and all, lower down the road."

Punch and Judy was a sight that poor Clara was wild after; there was nothing she enjoyed so much in life. Miss Graves really had passed the show on her way. This was a great temptation to Clara, and she seemed irresolute, but finally shook her head; she wanted to stay with Mary Goring. Miss Graves then suggested that Mary should accompany them and see Punch too, and Clara eagerly seized at it.

"So you had a visit from William Elliot yesterday?" observed Miss Graves, when they had gone to get ready. "What young lady was it he saw here?"

"He only saw his sister," Hester replied, forgetting, as she spoke, the temporary presence of Mary in the drawing-room. "And two terrible frights she gave me."

"Yes, he did," returned Miss Graves. "One of the young ladies, he told me."

"Oh, true, I remember now. It was my niece, Miss Goring."

"Then he is surely smitten with her," was the rejoinder of Miss Graves. "He kept talking about her to me last night, and said she was the sweetest girl he had ever seen."

"Ah, young men are apt to say that of all the pretty girls they meet," was Hester's answer; but somehow she thought of that strange chill again.

CHAPTER XXX.

CLARA'S ESCAPADE.

EASTER approached, and Clara Elliot went home on the Wednesday in Passion Week to spend some days. On the Thursday she got Mary Goring into her head, and so teased her mother to send for her, that Lady Elliot grew quite cross. In most cases Clara was easily swayed as a child, but when she did get hold of a fixed idea and turn obstinate over it, there was no moving her. At the dinner-table she refused to eat.

"I don't want any dinner," she sullenly remarked; "I want Mary Goring."

"Who in the world is Mary Goring?" inquired Sir Thomas.

"Oh, one of her schoolfellows," replied Lady Elliot. "She has been dinning the name into me all day."

"Nonsense," responded Sir Thomas. "You are putting on more childishness than you need, Clara. Eat your dinner."

"She is not nonsense," retorted Clara. "She is better than you are here. William knows it."

A flush, quite uncalled for, rose to William Elliot's face. "Clara has talked to me about some young lady whom she seems to have taken a fancy to," he explained. "I suppose it is the same."

"You saw her!" burst forth Clara; "you have seen her twice. You know you did."

"Have I?" answered William.

Lady Elliot interposed, and, to pacify Clara, promised that she should fetch Mary Goring on the morrow. But the morrow was Good Friday. They went to church. After service some visitors came in, and the day passed without fetching Mary Goring. Never had they seen Clara Elliot so obstinately sullen. Alas! the next morning Clara was missing. The house was searched, but she was nowhere to be found. They supposed she must have risen early, dressed herself, and then must have gone out, unseen by Miss Graves and the servants. Her bonnet, velvet mantle and furs were gone. A strange commotion the house was in. Never had Clara Elliot attempted such an escapade before. Lady Elliot was nearly out of her senses.

"She must have gone after that young girl she was worrying about," cried Sir Thomas when informed of the disaster. "Mary—what was it? Her schoolfellow."

Nothing more likely. And William Elliot, the most active of the party, flew downstairs and into a cab.

The Miss Halliwells were seated at breakfast in the dining-room, when one of the servants entered, and said that Mr. William Elliot had called and wished to see her mistress.

"Mr. William Elliot at this hour!" repeated Hester, rising from her chair. "Can anything have happened?"

"The gentleman is waiting outside," interposed Ann. "He would not go upstairs."

"Outside! Dear me! Go on with breakfast, children. —I beg your pardon for keeping you there," said Hester, as he entered; "I had no conception that you had not gone into the drawing-room. I hope nothing serious has happened?"

"It is I who need excuse for disturbing you at this hour," he answered with a smile. And then he told his

errand. But they had seen nothing of Miss Elliot, and he hurried away to prosecute the search.

About middle day Lady Elliot arrived, nearly frantic. "A girl like Clara, who wants proper sense to take care of herself!" she uttered. "Suppose she falls into bad hands! Oh, Miss Halliwell, this horrible suspense will kill me."

They could give her little consolation, and she soon left. In her state of mind she could not remain long in one place. Halliwell House was like a fair that day. Hester soon found she had to change her costume, and have a fire lighted in the drawing-room: William Elliot coming, as has been mentioned, in the morning; Alfred running in and out, looking for her up and down the road, and calling in at the police-station; then Miss Graves coming; then Lady Elliot; then another flying visit from William; and in the afternoon they were honoured by a visit from Sir Thomas. The family, that day, passed their time running between their own house and Hester's, so certain did they make of the latter's being the point of Clara's journey. Sir Thomas was handsome still, but his manners had grown reserved, and his words few; widely different from what had been the impudent and attractive Tom Elliot.

"You perceive, madam," he observed to Hester, "we can only arrive at the conclusion that my daughter must have left home to come in search of Miss—Miss—excuse me, I forget the name."

"Miss Goring."

"Miss Goring. I beg your pardon. May I be permitted to see Miss Goring? Though possibly she may not be able to throw any light on my daughter's movements."

What light was Mary likely to throw, thought Hester. However, there could be no objection to Sir Thomas Elliot's seeing her if he wished. So Mary was called.

An expression of surprise arose to Sir Thomas's face when she answered the summons. He had probably only expected to behold a silly school-girl, and in walked Mary, with her ladylike, high-bred manners, her handsome half-mourning dress, and her winning and refined beauty. His manner to Hester had been a little patronizing—or she fancied so—but he rose up to Miss Goring the finished gentleman.

"My daughter speaks of you as her friend," he said; "she was doubtless coming in search of you; can you offer any suggestion as to where she may have strayed?"

"No," answered Mary. "Unless"—she hesitated, while a damask colour flew to her cheek, for it was not pleasant to speak to a father of his daughter's delinquencies—"unless she should have met the show she is so fond of, and have followed it."

"You allude to Punch. But I think it was too early for the ridiculous exhibition to be abroad," replied Sir Thomas, who was aware of his daughter's predilection for the popular amusement.

"Have you suggested it to the police who are in search of her?" asked Hester. "If she did happen to see it, she would be certain to stray away in its wake."

"No," he said; "it did not occur to me. But I will lose no time in doing so now. I really thank you very much, madam, for the thought." So Sir Thomas Elliot bowed himself out, and they saw him get into his brougham.

The next arrival was Miss Graves again, just as they were going to tea, which Hester then caused to be carried into the drawing-room. Lady Elliot had sent her.

"This is really dreadful!" she exclaimed, taking the cup Hester handed her; "Lady Elliot is quite beside herself with excitement, picturing all sorts of shocking things happening to the child. And she says it's my fault;

that I ought to have looked better after her. I am quite exhausted."

"I know what I should do," said Lucy. "I should set the bellman to work."

"There is no bellman in London," laughed Master Alfred —the affair was fun to him. "*I* should engage all the Punch and Judies going, and set 'em up at the street corners. She'd be sure to appear before one of them."

"I do not fear her coming back safely," cried Miss Graves. "Who would harm a poor half-witted child like Clara Elliot?"

Lucy Halliwell looked grave. "How are they to know she is half-witted? And we do hear frightful stories of the wickedness of London."

"Which are all true," eagerly interrupted Alfred. "If they can catch hold of an unprotected female, they cut off her hair and draw her teeth, and the fashionable barbers and dentists give them no end of money for the spoil."

"Be quiet, Alfred."

"It's true, Aunt Lucy. If you don't believe me, you just go into one of the thieves' streets some day, and see how they'd serve you. My! if Miss Elliot has strayed there, won't she come back with a bald head and an empty mouth!"

All this was, of course, nothing but nonsense on Alfred's part. He little thought—but it will be better not to anticipate. They were still at tea when William Elliot came in again, so pale and fagged that Hester was grieved to see him, and said so.

"I own I am disheartened," he replied. "If Clara is not found before night, I tremble for the consequences to my mother. And where to search, or what to do, more than we are already doing, I do not know."

"I say, here's a visit," exclaimed Alfred, who was then

at the window. "Does Miss Elliot wear a white petticoat?"

"What do you mean?" Hester sharply said. For she did not like to hear him joking about it in the presence of William Elliot.

"I am not joking, Aunt Hester," was the boy's answer. "It's a visit at your gate. A queer kind of carriage, laden with human live stock, and drawn by a Jerusalem pony. What will you bet one of them is not Miss Elliot?"

They all flocked to the window. "Good heavens!" exclaimed Miss Graves. It *was* Miss Elliot. But in such a condition! They will never forget the sight.

The vehicle was drawn up before the gate—one of those wide boards on wheels, on which you may have seen vegetables and shell-fish hawked for sale. Flat upon it sat a man, who drove the donkey, a woman holding a child, and between them a female figure in a broken straw bonnet, a ragged cotton shawl of no colour but dirt, and a white petticoat. The figure was Clara Elliot; when she came upstairs they recognized her, not before, and William Elliot's lips turned as white as ashes.

What an object the unfortunate girl presented! No bonnet and mantle, no furs, no silk dress, and no gloves. Even her boots had disappeared. Clara seemed to enjoy the affair amazingly, and threw herself on a chair with bursts of laughter, hugging the shawl round her. Her hair and teeth were safe.

"Does this here young lady belong to here?" began the man, a tall fellow, all skin and bone, sickly and delicate-looking.

They all answered in a breath that the young lady did belong to them; but Mr. Elliot's voice rose highest, asking where she had been detained, and what brought her home in that state.

"I was away on my rounds, gentlefolks," returned the man; "and knowed nothing on it till I come home this a'ternoon, and found the young miss along of my missis. They can tell you about it better nor I can."

The man pushed his wife forward as he concluded. She had mild blue eyes and a hectic colour. And, now that the first shock of their appearance was wearing off, Hester began to like the people. Rough and dark as the man was, common and low as they were in station, she felt sure they were honest and kindly.

"We keep a bit of a shed for coal, ma'am, near to Covent Garden, and for greens and things that my husband can't sell on his rounds," the woman began, addressing herself to Hester, whom she probably took for Clara's mother; "and this morning, about eleven o'clock, as I was coming in from delivering a quarter of a hundred of coals to a customer, somebody lays hold on me and asks if that was the way to Halliwell House, ———— Road. So I said, no, it wasn't, nor anywhere near it; and then I noticed what a odd-looking young person it was, and she burst out laughing (perhaps because she saw me a-staring at her), and up and told me she had been robbed of her clothes. Well, I did not pay no attention to her, for we have all sorts of girls in our part, saving your presence, ladies, but she followed me into our shed, and began playing with my children, and asked me to get a cab and take her home. I asked her if she'd got some money, and she said no, they had taken her purse; but her friends would pay. So after that I put some questions to her, and began to believe her tale, especially as I saw that her underclothes, which they had not touched, was fine, like a lady's."

"Who took your clothes from you, Clara?" interposed William Elliot, in the kind but authoritative tone he sometimes used to her.

"I was coming here to fetch Mary," she answered. "I had walked a good way, and was looking for the turning, but I could not find the right one. Then a woman asked what I wanted, and I told her, and she said she would show me, and took me along with her."

"Well? Go on, Clara," said her brother.

"She took me into a room, up some dirty stairs, where there was another woman. I was angry, and said that was not Halliwell House, and she said we were only going to have some breakfast first. She said that," added Clara, her eyes brightening up, "because I told her I had cheated mamma and all of them, and run away without any. Then she and the other woman took my own things off me, and my pocket, and put these on, and when I cried, they promised I should have them all back again when I got home, and they gave me some bread and bacon."

"What did they do after that?"

"After that the other woman came out with me, and said she was going to bring me here, but suddenly she was gone, and I could not find her. It was a nasty dirty street, and I did not know my way, so I asked *her*," pointing to the woman in the room.

"It is the same tale she told to me, ma'am," resumed the woman to Hester. "There are wretches in this wicked town that do prowl about to pick up children, and others who can't defend themselves, and rob them of their things. So I believed as the young lady had telled the truth, and I kep' her in our back room, along of my young ones, and wouldn't let her go into the street, as she wanted, for she don't seem to be one as ought to be abroad by herself; and I give her a bit of our dinner, such as it was. And when my husband and big boy came home, I persuaded of him to bring her down here, which he didn't want to, and I came along myself; for, says I, her friends will be more

satisfied like if I goes to testify that she has been kep' safe since she come into my hands. I'm ashamed as I'd nothing to lend her to put on, in place of them dirty things," added the woman, with an increase in her hectic colour, and lowering her tone; "but this have been a hard winter with us, and I have been forced to put away all but what I stands up in."

There was genuine good feeling betrayed in the woman's speech, and William Elliot's eyelashes glistened, as he turned to look out upon the road. His unfortunate sister! what a display it was for him!

"It warn't as I were unfeeling, or thought of my trouble in bringing the young person down, gentlefolks," gruffly spoke up the husband, "nor it warn't as I knew the animal was done up; but there ain't a busier day throughout the year for us costermongers than Easter Saturday, and I was going out again with a fresh stock, which now I have lost the sale on. Our boy Bill, too, as we've left in charge of the shed and the young ones, can't sell as his mother can."

"You shall be no loser by what you have done, my good man," interposed Mr. Elliot, warmly.

"Well, sir, it were my missis as talked me into it, so I won't say as it warn't. 'Suppose it were our own girl, Bill, as were lost,' says she to me, 'shouldn't we be in a peck o' grief over it? and ain't this one's folks the same? and ain't it our duty to take her home without delaying of it, and let 'em see that no great harm have come to her?' So, with that, I harnessed in the donkey again, for I had took him out for a rest, and folded a sack for the young lady to sit upon, and brought her down."

What more he would have said, if anything, was interrupted by Clara Elliot. She sprang to the tea-table, seized upon a slice of bread-and-butter, which was lying there on

a plate, and offered it to the woman. "Take it," she said; "you gave me some of your potatoes to-day."

"Not for me, miss," was the answer; "I can do without it. If I might give it to my little boy instead"—looking at Hester—"I should be glad." She had held the boy in her arms the whole time, but with difficulty, for he seemed to be a most restless child about two years old. "He's always up at the sight of food, ma'am, for he don't get enough of it, and children has such appetites."

William Elliot took the bread-and-butter from Clara, doubled it, and gave it himself to the child. "He shall get enough in future," he whispered to the mother, with one of his kindly looks.

The people went out, William Elliot with them; Alfred followed, and the party upstairs gathered round the window to see them drive away again. The man sat down first, helped up his wife, civilly enough, and they stuck the boy between them on Clara's sack. William Elliot stood by, writing down in his pocket-book the man's address, and Alfred Goring stood at the gate, in a frenzy of delight at the scene. Almost at the same moment Lady Elliot drove up in a hired cab: her own horses were tired.

She came upstairs, and was painfully agitated when she heard the details, although thankful to receive Clara safe and sound. The girl's half-clad, ludicrous appearance, the wretched substitute for her own clothes, the description of her conveyance home, the nondescript vehicle on which she sat in state, on the coal-sack, behind the donkey, the rough costermonger and his half-starved wife, and, worst of all, the girl's utter indifference to the shame! Indifference! she *enjoyed* the remembrance of the novel ride. All this was as wormwood to Lady Elliot.

Clara turned restive about going home, and said she would stop where she was, with Mary Goring. It was

thought advisable to give in to her, at any rate for a day or two: and she went dancing upstairs to have her clothes changed, the desirable articles she had been rejoicing over being immediately consigned to the dust-bin.

"Oh, William, what a disgrace!" murmured Lady Elliot to her son, as the red flush came into her pale cheeks, the light into her glistening eye; "better I had no daughter, you no sister, than to have her thus; better that it would please God to remove her from us!"

Little less agitated was he, as he bent before his mother, little less flushed his own face, but it was with pain at hearing such words from her. "Dear mother," he whispered, as he took her hands, "look not upon it in this spirit. Rather be thankful that the affliction is so much lighter than it might be—and especially thankful this day, as I am, that she is restored to us unharmed."

She strained his hands in hers, before parting with them, and gazed tenderly into his handsome face, feeling thankful for the blessing bestowed upon her in *him*. And, indeed, she had reason to do so: for there are few sons in these degenerate days like William Elliot.

CHAPTER XXXI.

SIR THOMAS AND LADY ELLIOT.

So that morning chill, as Hester Halliwell called it, had worked itself out, and the tribulation had come. *Was* it her fault? She asked herself the question every hour of her life. Perhaps when Lady Elliot invited Mary to spend some time in her luxurious home, Hester ought to have refused. But Lady Elliot pressed for her, saying what a comfort she would be to their unfortunate daughter, and Hester was laughed at for hinting at an objection. Lucy laughed at her; Miss Graves laughed at her; Frances Goring, though she was little more than a child, laughed at her; and when they inquired her grounds, she had none to give, for not even to herself did she, or could she, define them. "They live luxuriously, they keep gay company, servants, carriages; it will make Mary discontented with her own quieter sphere of life," were all the arguments Hester could urge; none difficult to overrule. So Mary went for a few days at Easter, which would have been nothing, for she came back perfectly heart-whole: but she went again at Midsummer to accompany Lady Elliot and Clara to the seaside, and then the mischief was done. What else could have been expected, thrown, as she was, into the fascinating society of William Elliot?

But who was to know that he would make one of the party? No one. In the first week of Lady Elliot's arrival

at Seatown, she was surprised at being followed thither by her son. He had come for some sea-bathing, he said, and forthwith engaged apartments at an hotel. Nine weeks Lady Elliot remained, and the whole of that time he and Mary Goring were thrown together. Sir Thomas Elliot wrote once, a curt, decisive letter of three lines, demanding how much more time he meant to waste, and Mr. William wrote back that he was studying where he was, just as hard as he could in his chambers. So he was: studying the sweet face and pure mind of Mary Goring. Had Sir Thomas suspected that, his letter might have been more decisive.

"I guessed how it was," Miss Graves said afterwards to Hester. "There were climbings up the cliffs, and ramblings on the beach after sea shells, and readings in the afternoon, and moonlight lingerings in the garden in the evening: Mr. William could not quite deceive me. I was left to take care of Clara Elliot, while he talked sentiment with Miss Goring."

"Strolling on the beach together, and talking sentiment by moonlight!" uttered Hester, in dismay. "And you could see all this going on and never write to me!"

"It's the moonlight does it all," peevishly retorted Miss Graves; "sentimental strolls would come to nothing without it. The moon puts more nonsense into young heads than all the novels that ever were written. I'll give you an example. One night they were all out in the garden, Mr. William, Clara, and Miss Goring. A long, narrow strip of ground it was at the back of the house, stretching down nearly to the sea. Tea came in, and Lady Elliot called to them from the window, but no one answered, so I had to hunt them up. I tied my handkerchief over my head, for I had a touch of toothache, and away I went. It was an intensely hot night, the moon as bright as silver; and I

looked here, and I looked there, till I reached the end of the garden. On the bench there, fast asleep, with her head resting on the hard rock behind her, was Clara, and close by stood William Elliot, with his arm round Mary, both of them gazing at the moon. Now, I ask you, Miss Halliwell, or any other impartial person, whether such a scene could have been presented to me in broad daylight? People are reserved enough then, and take care to stand at a respectful distance from each other. The moon is alone to blame, and I'll maintain it."

She vexed Hester excessively with her rubbish about the moon. "As if," thought Hester, "when she saw them growing fond of each other, she could not have despatched a hint of it by post!" "What could Lady Elliot have been thinking of?" she asked aloud.

"Bless you, *she* saw nothing of it," returned Miss Graves. "Her idea was that William haunted us for the sake of taking care of Clara, and she was rarely out with us herself. She makes so much of Mr. William: it would never enter her imagination that he could fall in love with anything less than a lord's daughter. She would see no more danger in Mary Goring than in me. But there's no great harm done, Miss Halliwell. When I was Mary Goring's age I had lots of attachments, one after the other, and they never came to anything. A dozen at least."

Hester thought it very stupid to compare herself with Mary Goring. Not that she wished to underrate Miss Graves, who was estimable in her way, but she and Mary were so differently constituted. Miss Graves full of practical sobriety, without a grain of romance in her composition, all head; while Mary was made up of imaginative sentiment and refined feeling, all heart. The one *would* be likely to have a dozen "attachments" and forget them as soon as they were over; but the other, if she once loved, would

retain the traces for all her future life. It was of no use, however, saying so to Miss Graves—she would not have understood it; and Hester was too vexed to argue. Besides, it would not undo what had been done.

Hester had seen it as soon as Mary returned from Seatown. There was a change about the girl; a serene look of inward happiness, an absence of mind to what was going on around her, a giving way to dreamy listlessness of thought. And when, in the course of conversation, it came out that William Elliot had made one of the party at Seatown, her aunt's surprised exclamation caused the flush in Mary's cheeks to deepen into glowing, conscious crimson. In one of her letters Mary had mentioned William's name, but Hester never supposed he was there for more than a day or two—had taken a run down to see his mother and sister. That suspicious crimson convinced her at once. She wished it anywhere but in Mary's face; and when Miss Graves went to Halliwell House, a few days subsequently, to spend an evening, Hester spoke to her. Hence the above conversation.

"You need not annoy yourselves over it," persisted Miss Graves, who was anxious to excuse herself. "If they did fall in love with each other—which I dare say they did, and I won't tell any story about it—they will soon forget it, now they don't meet. If you keep her out of sight when Mr. William calls here, he will soon cease coming, and the affair will die a natural death."

"Of course Mary will not be permitted to see him," rejoined Hester, warmly: "but as to the affair dying out, that's another thing."

The crosses that good resolutions meet with; the ruses young people are up to, unsuspected by old ones! While Hester and Miss Graves were cleverly laying down plans for the separation of the two parties in question, they were

actually together in the dining-room below. Upon Hester's descending to that apartment some time afterwards, there she came upon them. They were standing at the open window, enjoying each other's society in the dangerous twilight hour of that summer's night; in the sweet scent of the closing flowers; in the calm rays of the early stars—all dangerous together for two young hearts. The saying of "knocking one down with a feather" could not precisely apply to Hester, for you might have knocked her down with half one.

"Well, I'm sure!" uttered Hester, not in her usual tone of polite courtesy. "I did not know *you* were here. Have you been here long?"

"Not long," replied William Elliot, advancing to shake hands.

Not long! It came into Hester's mind, as she spoke, that she had heard the knock of a visitor a full hour before.

She had not seen him for three months, and his good looks, his winning manners, struck upon her more forcibly than ever. Not so pleasantly as they used to do, for the annoying reflection suggested itself—If they won over to him her old heart, what must they have done by Mary's? Hester took her resolution: it was to speak openly to him: and she sent Mary upstairs to Lucy and Miss Graves.

"Mr. Elliot," she began, in heat, "was this well done?"

He looked fearlessly at her, with his truthful eye and open countenance. "Is what well done?" he rejoined.

"I am deeply grieved at having suffered my niece to accompany your mother to the seaside," continued Hester. "Had I known you were to be of the party, she should certainly not have gone."

"Why not, Miss Halliwell?"

"Why not! I hear of ramblings on the sands, and

moonlight interviews in the garden—you with Mary Goring. Was this well done, sir?"

"It was not ill done," was his reply.

"Mr. Elliot," Hester went on, "I am a plain-speaking old body, but I have had some experience in life, and I find that plain speaking answers best in the end. You must be aware that such conduct as you have pursued cannot well fail to gain the affections of an inexperienced girl: and my belief is that you have been wilfully setting yourself out to win those of Miss Goring."

"I will not deny it: I have tried to win them. Because, dear Miss Halliwell," he added, speaking with emotion, "because she first gained mine. I love Miss Goring, truly, fervently, with a love that will end only with my life. From the first day I saw her here, when poor Clara said she had found a new sister—you may remember it—she never ceased to haunt me; her face and its sweet expression, her manners, her gentle voice, were in my mind continually, and I knew they could only belong to a good, pure, and refined nature. It did not take long companionship, when we were thrown together, to perfect that love; and, that done, I did set myself out, as you observe, to win hers, in exchange. I trust I have succeeded."

Had Hester raced up to the top of the monument, where she had never yet ventured, the run could not more effectually have taken away her breath than did this bold avowal, which, to her ears, sounded as much like rhapsody as reason.

"And what, in the name of wonder, do you promise yourself by all this?" she asked, when she could give expression to her amazement. "What end can you have in view?"

"There is only one end that such an avowal could have in view, Miss Halliwell," he replied. "The end, the hope, that Miss Goring will become my wife."

"Well, you will excuse me, Mr. Elliot," said Hester, after a long stare at him, "but I fear you must be joking."

He laughed. "Why do you fear that?"

"There is no more probability of your marrying Mary Goring than there is of your marrying that chair. So the best thing you can do is to get her out of your head as speedily as you can."

He did not speak for some moments, and the colour mounted to his brow. "What is your objection to me, Miss Halliwell?"

"I suppose you are playing on my simplicity in asking what my objection is," returned Hester. "It is your family that the objection will come from, not mine. The son of the rich and great Sir Thomas Elliot will never be suffered to wed simple Mary Goring."

"Miss Goring is of gentle blood," he remonstrated.

"I trust she is," said Hester, drawing herself up; "though we, the sisters of her mother, are obliged to keep a school for our living. But your friends will look at position as well as gentle blood. May I ask if Sir Thomas and Lady Elliot know of this?"

"Not yet."

"As I thought, Mr. Elliot. Your romance with my niece must end this night."

"It will not, indeed, Miss Halliwell."

"Sir, it shall. And I must observe that you have acted a cruel part. A young lady's affections are not to be played with like a football. However, you have seen her for the last time."

"Allow me to see her once more," he rejoined.

"Not if I know it, sir."

"But for one instant, in your presence," he pleaded. "Surely that can do no harm, if we are to part."

Something came into Hester's brain just then about

George Archer—a vision of her last interview with him in Lord Seaford's park. "Why should she deny these two a final adieu?" she asked herself. So she relented, and called Mary down—and Hester reproached herself afterwards with being exceedingly soft for her pains.

Mary shrank to Hester's side when she came in, but William Elliot drew her away. "I have been avowing to your aunt how matters stand," he said. "She would persuade me to relinquish you; she thinks such love as ours can be thrown off at will. So I requested your presence here, Mary, that we might assure her our engagement is of a different nature, that we are bound to each other by ties irrevocable in the spirit, as they shall hereafter be made so in reality."

So that was all Hester got for calling Mary. She had paled, and blushed, and faltered, and now she began to cry and tremble, and William Elliot leaned over her, and reassured her with words of the deepest tenderness. Hester saw nothing but perplexity before them, and not one bit of sleep did she get that night.

One day the renowned physician, Sir Thomas Elliot, was not himself. In lieu of the stately imperturbability which characterized the distinguished West End practitioner, his manners betrayed a nervousness, an absence of mind, never before witnessed in him. To one lady patient, who consulted him for dyspepsia, he ordered cod-liver oil and port wine; to another, far gone in consumption, he prescribed leeches, and to live upon barley-water. He had a large influx of patients that day, and an unusual number of calls to make from home. Not until the dinner-hour did he find his time his own.

He went straight to his wife's room, and sat down upon a low ottoman. Lady Elliot glanced round at him,

somewhat surprised, for it was not often her liege knight favoured her with his presence there in the day. She continued dressing without comment. Sir Thomas and Lady Elliot rarely wasted superfluous words one upon the other.

"Can't you finish for yourself and send her away?" cried Sir Thomas, indicating the attendant by a movement of the head.

More surprised still, but not curious (for Lady Elliot, young and handsome as she was still, really gave one the idea of possessing no interest in what related to this present life—or in the one to follow it, for the matter of that), she dismissed the maid, but did not withdraw herself or her eyes from the glass, as she continued her toilette.

"I did not think, Louisa, you could have been such a fool," was the complimentary opening of Sir Thomas Elliot, in low tones of intense indignation.

Lady Elliot looked at him—as well she might—and a flush rose to her face. She paused, however, before she spoke, coldly and resentfully.

"I proved myself that years ago."

Sir Thomas knew to what she alluded—her own hasty and unsanctioned union with himself—and a peevish "Tush!" broke from his lips.

"You have proved yourself a greater one now, Louisa, and you must pardon my plainness in saying so. If you and I rushed into a headlong marriage, it ought to have been the more reason for your not leading William into one."

"William!" echoed Lady Elliot, in a startled voice. It was, perhaps, the only subject that could arouse her. She idolized her son.

"You have got into this habit of taking your own course, without consulting or referring to me; going here, going there—doing this, doing that," proceeded Sir Thomas.

"When you went to Seatown for an eternal number of weeks, had you informed me that it was your intention to have William and Miss Goring there also, and make them companions to each other, I should have put a stop to it. Any one but you might have seen the result."

"Result?" faltered Lady Elliot, with a sickening foreshadowing of what was coming.

"Of course," angrily repeated Sir Thomas. "When a young fellow like William is thrown for weeks into the society of a girl, lovely and fascinating as—as—the deuce" —Sir Thomas, at the moment, could not think of any more appropriate simile—"only one result can be looked for. And it has turned up in his case."

"You mean——"

"That he is over head and ears in love with her; and has been to me this morning to ask my sanction to their marriage. I wish you joy of your daughter-in-law, Lady Elliot."

Lady Elliot scarcely suppressed a scream. "It is impossible! it is impossible!" she reiterated, in agitation. "I never thought of this."

"Then you must have lived at Seatown with your eyes shut. But I can hardly believe you. To think that you and Eliza Graves could be moping and meandering all those weeks, and not see what was going on under your very noses! Women are the greatest——"

What, Sir Thomas did not say, for he dropped his voice before bringing the sentence to a conclusion. "I thought William was at Seatown an unaccountable time, and wrote him word so," he continued; "but I never imagined you had Miss Goring there."

"You must have known it," returned Lady Elliot.

"How should I? I saw she was staying here the day or two before you went, but I thought—if I thought at all

about it—that, as a matter of course, she returned home. I say you are always acting for yourself, Lady Elliot, without reference to my feelings—if I have any, which, perhaps, you don't believe. When, the morning of the day fixed for your departure, I was summoned in haste out of town, you might have delayed it until the following one. Most wives would. But no, not you! I came back at night, and found you gone. How was I to know that you took Miss Goring with you?"

"It is too preposterous ever really to come to anything," observed Lady Elliot, anxious to find comfort in the opinion. "William, with his personal attractions, his talents, and his prospects, might marry into a duke's family if he chose."

"Exactly. But he chooses to marry into that of a schoolmistress."

"He must not 'choose,'" persisted Lady Elliot, growing excited; "he must be brought to reason."

"Brought to what?" asked the knight.

"Reason."

"I don't know," was the significant reply. "'Reason' did not avail in a similar case with you or with me. William may prove a chip of the old block."

"It never can be permitted," said Lady Elliot, vehemently. "Marry Mary Goring! It would be disgracing him for life. William would never prove so ungrateful."

"Leaving your ladyship the agreeable reflection that you were the chief instrument in bringing about the disgrace. Looking at the affair dispassionately, I do not see how it is to be prevented. William possesses money, independently of us. Enough to live upon."

"Enough to starve upon," scornfully interrupted Lady Elliot.

"Twice, nearly thrice as much as we enjoyed for many years of our early lives," rejoined Sir Thomas in a subdued

voice. "And to them, who are just now spoony with fantastic visions, 'Love in a cottage' may wear the appearance of love in a paradise."

"Can nothing be done—can *nothing* stop it?" reiterated Lady Elliot.

"One thing may. I should have put it in force this morning, but that I certainly thought you must be a party to this scheme, after what William let out of the goings-on at Seatown."

"And that thing?" she eagerly asked.

"To forbid it on pain of my curse, as I believe our parents very nearly did by us. I do not think William would brave it."

Lady Elliot pressed her hands over her eyes, as if she would shut out recollection of the years which had followed her rebellious marriage. The retrospect was one of dire anguish; far worse, in all probability, than had been the reality. Her husband turned to leave the room. She sprang after him, and drew him back.

"Oh, Thomas! anything but that. Never curse our boy, whatever betide. Think of the misery our disobedience entailed on us. Do not force *him* into it."

"Then you will let him marry the girl?"

"Yes, if the only alternative must be our fate over again for him."

"He comes to-night for the answer," continued Sir Thomas, standing with the door in his hand. "What is it to be? Consent? I leave the decision to you, for I will not, in this matter, subject myself to after-reproaches."

"Consent," she replied. But Lady Elliot wrung her hands in anger as she said it. She had anticipated so much more brilliant an alliance for her son.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A FORBIDDEN MARRIAGE.

So sunshine came into Halliwell House, for William Elliot went there and laid his proposals for Mary in due form before the Miss Halliwells. They could not believe their own ears. He frankly stated that Sir Thomas and Lady Elliot were not cordially inclined to the match, for they had expected him to choose rank and wealth; but they had not withheld their consent, and he was certain Mary would soon win her way to their entire love. Perhaps this was as much as Mary Goring could have hoped for; indeed more, for in point of worldly greatness William Elliot *was* above her. Hester suggested that they should not marry till the "entire love" of Sir Thomas and his wife had been gained, but Mr. Elliot laughed at her, and of course Mary thought with him. They were both in a maze of enchantment, and common sense, as Hester understood the word, was out of the question. Preparations were begun for the marriage, and for a few weeks the house was the pleasantest in the world.

"I told you it would turn out well," triumphantly exclaimed Miss Graves one day when she came down to see Clara Elliot.

"But you told us it would turn out well by coming to nothing," laughed Lucy.

They were happy. But an end came to it, as it comes for the most part to all things that are joyful and bright

in life. And then Hester asked herself how she could ever have been deluded into the belief that the son of Sir Thomas and Lady Elliot would really espouse Mary Goring.

A telegraphic summons came early one morning to the popular physician, Sir Thomas Elliot. He was wanted in all haste at Middlebury. Sir Thomas hastened to the Paddington station, caught the express train, and was with his patient — a lady — in the afternoon. Her medical attendant was Dr. Ashe; and a Mr. Warburton was also called in. When in conversation, the discourse of the medical men led to matters foreign to their patient—no very rare occurrence in medical consultations.

"I should like to know what her previous constitution has been," remarked Sir Thomas to Dr. Ashe, speaking in reference to the patient. "I presume you have been her usual medical attendant."

"No, I have not," replied Dr. Ashe—who was only called "Dr." according to the Middlebury fashion; "this is the first time I have attended her. Dr. Goring used to be the family attendant. But she must have enjoyed pretty good health, for he has been dead—let me see—more than two years, and no one has been called in to her since."

Dr. Goring! Sir Thomas Elliot pricked up his ears, and a flash of intelligence darted into his mind. She who was soon to be his son's wife was a native of Middlebury, and the daughter of a medical man. This Dr. Goring, then, must have been her father. He would ask a few particulars.

"What sort of a man was Dr. Goring?" he suddenly said. "Respectable? Popular?"

"Very much so," was the reply of Dr. Ashe.

"Until that nasty business occurred about his wife," broke in Mr. Warburton. "He lost both respect and popularity then."

"What business was that?" inquired Sir Thomas.

"She was recovering from an illness—one of the nicest little women you ever saw—in fact, she was all but well," observed Dr. Ashe. "I had seen her in the morning—for I attended her with all her children—and told her that the next day she might move into the drawing-room. That was about eleven o'clock. By five in the afternoon she was dead."

"What from?" was the question of the physician.

"Poison, Sir Thomas."

"Poison!" echoed Sir Thomas Elliot.

"Strychnia."

"By whom administered?"

"There was the question," said Dr. Ashe. "It never has been cleared up from that day to this. With some people poor Goring got the credit of it; but I believe the man to have been as innocent as I was. Nay, I am sure of it."

Sir Thomas Elliot rose from his chair in a perturbed manner. His son about to marry the daughter of a man suspected of——! He sat down again.

"The case was published in the *Lancet*," resumed Dr. Ashe; "of course, without casting any conjectures as to the administerer."

"I remember now—I remember reading it," cried Sir Thomas. "But it never struck me that—— What were the grounds for suspecting the husband?"

"In my opinion, I say, there were no grounds," repeated Dr. Ashe. "A few only may have thought so, in just the first blush of the affair. I never saw a more affectionate husband than Goring was; and he had nothing to gain by her death—everything to lose."

"The insurance money," suggested Mr. Warburton.

"Nonsense! I know some cast it in his teeth—very

unjustly, if they had only considered the facts. Mrs. Goring had a clear income of three hundred a year—an annuity which died with her: did not go to her husband or children, understand, Sir Thomas—absolutely died with her. She had insured her own life some years before for three thousand pounds for the benefit of her children. But what is a sum of three thousand pounds in comparison with three hundred a year? And Goring did not touch the money; he invested it for his children. He was a maligned man."

"Was he accused of the crime?" asked Sir Thomas.

"Oh no—no; nothing of that sort. At his wife's interment—I never saw such a crowd in the churchyard before—some voices hissed him; that was the extent of it. But if ever grief was genuine in this world, it was Goring's for the loss of his wife. They were on the wrong scent," muttered Dr. Ashe in a lower tone.

"Dr. Goring, unfortunately, did not show out quite clearly upon another point," interrupted Mr. Warburton. "There was a governess residing with them, a Miss Howard, and he was too attentive to her; but Goring was a free man at all times in his manners with women. Some said it was her fault; that she laid herself out to attract him; and altogether the affair had given pain and annoyance to Mrs. Goring. So Miss Howard received warning to leave, and the little Gorings were to be sent to school. Before the change was made, Mrs. Goring was poisoned!"

"Was this governess suspected?" inquired Sir Thomas Elliot.

"I don't know what other people may have done," interposed Dr. Ashe, warmly. "I had my opinion upon the point, and always shall have. But it does not do to speak out one's opinions too freely. There was no proof."

"Where was the strychnia procured?"

"From Goring's own surgery. At least, such was the conclusion drawn, for he kept some there; though whether the bottle had been touched or not, he could not himself tell. Mrs. Goring had dined, and was asleep, the nurse having gone to her dinner. During her absence, the poison was introduced into a glass of water, which, as was usual, stood at the bedside, and Mrs. Goring, when she awoke, drank of it. Goring was in the garden the whole of this time—never came into the house at all, as the servants testified, until aroused by the screams in Mrs. Goring's room. Miss Howard was in the dining-room, which adjoined the surgery, and the servants equally testified that if she had quitted it to go upstairs they must have heard her. So the case was wrapped in mystery, and remains so."

"The worst feature was Mr. Goring's marrying the woman afterwards," observed Mr. Warburton.

"Marrying *her!*—the governess!" exclaimed Sir Thomas Elliot.

"He did. She was dismissed from the house on Mrs. Goring's death; but twelve months afterwards Miss Howard became Mrs. Goring."

"Why, the man must have been mad!" uttered Sir Thomas.

"He was wrong there," said Dr. Ashe. "I told him so. But what I said went for nothing, for he was bent on it. His death was a mystery also: I could never fathom it. He married this woman, Sir Thomas, went off with her for a fortnight, and came back so changed that we hardly knew him. He started on the journey a gay, healthy man; he returned wasted in frame, broken in spirits, and in two months was laid in his first wife's grave. There was no particular complaint, but he wasted away to death—literally *pined* away, as it seemed."

"And pined in silence," added Mr. Warburton; "for he would never acknowledge himself ill."

"I see, gentlemen," returned Sir Thomas; "it was a bad affair altogether, from beginning to end; one not too well calculated to bear the light of day."

"At any rate, the light of day has never been thrown upon it," answered Dr. Ashe.

("And the daughter of such a man shall never become William's wife," mentally concluded Sir Thomas Elliot.) "But, to go back to the next room, gentlemen," he added aloud. "My opinion——"

We need not follow their consultation for their patient. It came to an end, and Sir Thomas Elliot went steaming up to town again by the first train.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

MOTHER AND SON.

THE train by which Sir Thomas Elliot went up to London happened to be a slow one, stopping at every station, which drove the physician into a fever nearly as great as that of the poor lady he had been to visit, he was so intensely eager to meet his wife—a compliment he had not paid her of recent years.

Lady Elliot seized with avidity upon the information. It was a pretext for *demanding* of William to break off the match. "Of course," she said, "he will not think of entering upon the connection now."

A presentiment struck Hester that something was wrong, when Ann went into the schoolroom and said Sir Thomas Elliot wanted her. These presentiments do come across us sometimes, without our knowing why or wherefore. Do they ever fail to be borne out? They never did with Hester. Surely there was nothing unusual, nothing to create surprise or uneasiness, in Sir Thomas Elliot's paying a morning visit to the Miss Halliwells, connected as the families were about to become; yet, before Hester reached the drawing-room door, all that was to take place seemed to flash upon her. Sir Thomas turned at her entrance, and prefaced what he had to say by stating that he had been called to Middlebury the previous day on professional business.

"I am aware of it," answered Hester. "William took tea with us last evening, and mentioned that you were gone there."

"How did he know it?" growled Sir Thomas under his breath. "Called in and heard it from his mother, I suppose? Well, madam, to be brief—for I have patients waiting for me at home, and knew not how to spare time for coming here—I am concerned to tell you that I received an account of the late Dr. Goring ('Doctor,' as I hear him universally called, though I find he was only a general practitioner) which has considerably surprised me."

"In what way, sir?" asked Hester, with outward calmness, though her heart was fluttering sadly.

"Why, madam, can you be ignorant that—you must pardon my speaking plainly; I only repeat the statement as it was given to me—that Dr. Goring was suspected of having poisoned his wife?"

"Oh, Sir Thomas!" interrupted Hester, "do not, I beseech you, speak so injuriously of the dead. Dr. Goring was an honourable man, of a kind, good nature, a gentleman and a scholar, one not capable of so dreadful a crime. I am cognisant of all the particulars, and I assert that whoever accused Dr. Goring of killing her was guilty of a wicked calumny."

"But he *was* suspected?" urged Sir Thomas.

"Not by those who knew him, and knew the circumstances."

"There was some one else mixed up in the affair—a governess."

"Unhappily there was," answered Hester. "Say, rather, the author of it all, Sir Thomas," she added, with emphasis. "But I must only say this in a whisper, and to you."

"Who afterwards became Dr. Goring's wife," continued Sir Thomas, looking steadfastly at Hester.

"I am ashamed to say she did."

"Well, madam, this is just what I have heard. We will not differ about minor details; the facts are the same. Under the circumstances, you cannot wonder that I have forbidden my son to think more of Miss Goring."

"Oh, Sir Thomas!" exclaimed Hester. "It will be a cruel thing!"

"I hope not. I do not wish to hurt the young lady's feelings more than is unavoidable; and I cast no reproach upon *her*. I believe her to be, personally, most estimable. Still, I must have due consideration for my son's honour and for that of his family; and a young lady liable to be pointed at as—as—in short, as the daughter of Dr. Goring of Middlebury, cannot be eligible to become William Elliot's wife."

He said more, but Hester was too grieved, too stunned, to hear clearly what it was. Nothing could soften the bare and abrupt fact that he peremptorily broke off the negotiation for an alliance with Mary Goring. She watched him get into his carriage from the window, her heart painfully failing her. *How* was she to break it to Mary?

That same day, a little later, William Elliot sat with his mother in her morning-room. Marks of agitation were on both countenances; and to little wonder, for she was seconding what her husband had previously said to him, indignantly forbidding his intended marriage, and he listened in a state of rebellion, as indignantly remonstrating. Never, until now, had William Elliot been aroused to anger against his parents; he was not only a dutiful son, but fondly attached to them.

"Why persist in attributing our conduct to caprice, when we are only actuated by a desire for your honour and happiness?" urged Lady Elliot. "There is no help for it, William. You cannot marry one whose father's name was stained with sin."

"I have made it my business to inquire into the particulars of the prejudice against Dr. Goring," returned Mr. Elliot. "When my father stated to me, last night, what he had heard at Middlebury, I determined to seek out a fellow I know who comes from there. Stone, his name is; he is reading for the Bar; his chambers are next to mine, in Lincoln's Inn. I have been with him this morning, and heard the details of the affair, perhaps more fully than my father did; and I would stake my life on Dr. Goring's innocence."

"As if a London law-student, young and credulous as yourself, could know anything of such particulars!" slightingly spoke Lady Elliot.

"He was at home when it happened," retorted William, his pale face flushing with pain at his mother's tone. "His father, James Stone, of Middlebury, was solicitor to Dr. Goring; they lived within a few doors of each other; the families were on terms of intimacy, and young Stone knows all, even to the minutest details. Do not throw ridicule upon what I say, mother. Dr. Goring was a cruelly aspersed man."

"No," said Lady Elliot.

"Yes," persisted William. "Were I a perfectly uninterested party, I should say the same. I look at the facts dispassionately, and my reason tells me so."

"How very obstinate you are, William! Do you dispute that Mrs. Goring died the death she did?"

"No. On that point, unhappily, there is no room for doubt."

"Or that some one residing in the house must have dealt her death out to her?"

"So it would seem."

"Then who was that person?"

"Not her husband. There was another."

"The governess. But Dr. Goring afterwards made that woman his second wife. Was there no crime, no dishonour in that, William?"

William Elliot sat silent, his brow contracting.

"He cannot be defended there; it was an unseemly connection; but Dr. Goring never would, or did, credit anything against her, and his having made her his wife proves that. He was a most honourable-minded, kind man, and a universal favourite. I tell you what, mother—had you and Sir Thomas not been secretly averse to my marriage yourselves, I should never have had Dr. Goring's conduct brought up as a plea against it."

"You are prejudiced and unjust," said Lady Elliot. "If we argue until night, we shall not agree."

"I am sorry for that," observed William; "for, if so, only one course is open to me."

"What is that?" cried Lady Elliot, quickly.

"Though I assure you, my dearest mother, it will be with the very utmost reluctance that I adopt it—that of marrying without your consent."

Lady Elliot half sprang from her seat, and a sound of pain, too sharp for a groan, escaped her.

"My happiness, my very life, are bound up in Miss Goring," he resumed. "To separate us now, after allowing the intimacy, sanctioning the measures of our marriage, would be cruel injustice. I will not submit to it."

"William," she uttered in visible agitation, "you cannot marry in defiance of your father and mother. You dare not."

"Not without deliberation, and in grief and great repugnance, have I formed the resolution; but I owe a duty to Miss Goring, as well as to my father and mother. The proposed allowance to me I shall not expect or ask for. The house I have taken I must give up, and look

out for a smaller one ; and we must make my own income suffice for our wants, until I can bring my profession into use."

"You speak of duty to Miss Goring," she resumed with emotion ; "have you forgotten that to your parents lies your first and foremost duty—a duty ordained of God ?"

"Mother, I have forgotten nothing. I have debated the question with myself upon all points. And I believe that I am doing right in marrying."

"In defiance," she repeated, "of your father and mother ? *In defiance of them ?*"

"I am sorry that they drive me to it."

For several minutes Lady Elliot's agitation had been increasing, and it appeared now to rise beyond control. Two crimson spots shone on her pale cheeks, her slight frame shook with agitation, and her hands were cold and moist as she grasped those of her son.

"Listen, William," she said ; "I will tell you a painful tale. You may have gathered something of it in your boyhood, but not its details. *Will* you listen ? Or are you going to despise even my words ?"

"My dear mother ! You know I will listen, in all reverence. If you would but afford me the opportunity to be reverent in all things !"

"I was a happy girl at home. My mother died—and then I owed my father a double duty. I was but a child, barely eighteen, when a young man, handsome, William, as you are now, was introduced to us. He was extravagant, random, but he loved me ; and that was all I cared for. Our attachment became known to my father. He deemed this gentleman no eligible match for me ; he doubted his ability, in many ways, to render me happy ; and he put a stop to our meetings. He forbid me to think more of him ; he said if I did, in spite of his veto, pursue the acquaintance,

that he would discard me from his house for ever. On the other side, the friends were equally adverse to it; and *his* parents bade him, though in all kindness, shrink from the fruits of disobedience. His father, a clergyman, implored of him not to brave it; he told him that deliberate disobedience to a parent was surely visited on a child's head. Happy for us both had we attended to their counsel; but youth, in its ardour, sees not things as they are. In after-years, when soberness, experience, judgment have come to them, they look back and marvel at their blindness. We, he and I—oh, William! that I should have such an avowal to make to you!—set our parents' interdiction at nought, and I ran away from my home to become his wife. That man was Thomas Elliot, your father."

She was excessively excited. Her son would have begged of her not so to disturb herself, but she waved away his interruption.

"We gloried in having deceived them. Not so much for the deceit in itself—we had not quite descended to that—as that we had obtained our own will. But, William, how did it work? How does such sin always work?"

She paused, almost as though she waited for an answer. He did not speak.

"Look abroad in society, and watch the results; scan narrowly all those who have thus rebelliously entered on their own career. Sooner or later, more or less bitterly, retribution comes home to them. It may rarely be attributed to its right cause, even by themselves; and many there are who would laugh at what I am saying. None have had the cause that I have to note these things; and it is from long experience, from repeated and repeated instances I have witnessed of the confirmation of my opinion, that my firm conviction has been formed. Some are visited through poverty; some in their children; some

in themselves, in their unhappy life. We, William, have had a taste of all. In the early years of our union it was one constant struggle to live; perhaps you remember yet our poverty and contrivances. My children died off, all but you, one after the other; and she, Clara, who remained to us"—Lady Elliot sank her voice to a whisper—"were better off had she followed them. I and he whom I chose have had no mutual happiness, for we found that we were as unsuited to each other as man and wife can be. My father never forgave me; so, for his remaining years, and they were many, or seemed so, I was an alien from him. Thus have I dragged through life, trouble upon trouble pursuing me, and the consciousness of my sin ever haunting me. William, before you talk of marrying Mary Goring, you should know what it is to brave and live under a parent's curse."

William Elliot did not reply, but his face wore a look of keen anxiety.

"At morning, at the sun's rising; at eventide; in the nervousness of the dark night; in the glare of mid-day, was my disobedience present to me; heavily, heavily it pressed upon me. I would have forfeited all I possessed in life, even my remaining years, to have redeemed it; and, William, I prayed to God that He would in mercy keep *my* children from committing the like sin."

Lady Elliot paused for breath; and her face, a sufficiently young face still in years, but not in sorrow, was blanched, and her eyes were strained on her son.

"I prayed it as the greatest mercy that could then be accorded me. I have never ceased praying for it. William, will you, my ever-loving and dutiful boy, be the one to set that prayer at naught?"

No answer. His lips were white as her own.

"You were my firstborn, my first and dearest; in you

rests all the hope left to me; what other comfort have I in life? I have said to myself now and then, 'The closing years of my existence shall be brighter than the earlier ones, for my darling son shall be my stay and solace!' Oh, William, William! give me your promise now! I kneel to beg it. Say that you will never marry without our consent."

The lines of his pale face were working; it seemed that he would speak, but could not. Lady Elliot had sunk down at his feet and would not rise.

"If you bring upon yourself this same wretched fate, which has been our bane, I shall never know another moment's peace. I shall repine that you did not die in infancy; I shall wish, more than I have ever done, that I may die and be at rest from the trouble and care of this weary world. William, it is your mother who pleads with you. Promise that you will never marry in disobedience."

How could he resist such pleading—he, with duty and affection implanted in his heart by nature, and hitherto fondly cherished? It was not possible. "Mother, I promise it," he uttered, "as long as you and my father shall live. After that——"

"Nay, I will not extort a further promise. You will then be your own master. But until that time—you pass your word, William?"

"I do. You have it."

"Thank God! Now I am at rest."

"Which is equivalent to undertaking never to marry at all," murmured the unhappy young man, as he rose and quitted the room. "Oh, Mary! how shall I part with you?"

Hester was still standing at her drawing-room window after witnessing the departure of Sir Thomas Elliot, when she saw Lady Elliot's carriage drive up to the gate, and Miss Graves alight from it.

"I say," she cried, in her familiar way, as she entered, "what in the world is the matter? Do you know what I am sent here for?"

"Not exactly," replied Hester, though a dim suspicion floated through her mind.

"To take Clara back with me."

"To remove her entirely?"

"Yes; as far as I understand it."

Hester made no remark.

"I never was so astonished," continued Miss Graves. "'Have the Miss Halliwells offended you?' I asked. 'Have you any reason to be dissatisfied with them?'

"'Not with the Miss Halliwells,' she replied in her stiffest manner. Unsociable she is at times, but she was so much so this morning I did not dare to say another word. So all I could do was to put on my bonnet and obey orders; but I have been wondering the whole way down; and I met Sir Thomas in his brougham a little higher up. Had he been here?"

"He has not long left," replied Hester.

"Well now, Miss Halliwell, tell me what's wrong. Is it anything between William and your niece? Have they quarrelled?"

"They are not likely people to quarrel," rejoined Hester. "No; but Sir Thomas wishes to break off the marriage."

"Goodness me!" uttered Miss Graves. "And shall you allow him to do so?"

"How can I help it?"

"Then of course you'll bring an action against them for breach of promise, and all that?"

"Breach of promise!" echoed Hester, with a sickly smile. "Do not talk of such a thing, Miss Graves."

"Well, I should. What is their plea?"

"You must excuse my entering upon that. It is not,"

she hastily added, "anything personally connected with Mary. It relates to family matters; that much I will say."

"Does the objection come from Mr. William?"

"I think not. I am not sure."

"Well, it is incomprehensible," ejaculated Miss Graves. "I am sorry for Mary. It is a shabby trick to serve her."

Hester winced. "Shall I go and see that Clara is made ready?" she said.

"She must be made ready. Lady Elliot will not be pleased if I keep her horses waiting too long."

Hester withdrew; and soon Miss Graves left the house with Clara Elliot. Nothing was said to the child but that she was going home for the day. Neither did Hester say anything in the house; the burden of her thoughts still was, how should she break the tidings to Mary Goring? She did not go again into the schoolroom, at which Lucy was surprised; but she felt unequal to it. And the evening came, and still she had said nothing.

But the evening brought William Elliot. Hester knew his knock, and ran out of the drawing-room, where they were seated at tea, and called to the servants to show him into the dining-room, not to let him come up; and then she went down herself.

"Oh, William!" she exclaimed, unable to restrain her tears, "what is to be done?"

He took her hands, kind as ever, but his own were unsteady, and his face wore an unnatural paleness.

"What does Mary say? How does she bear it?" were his first words.

"I have not dared to tell her. I did not know how."

"That is well. She had better hear it from me."

"From you! Oh no! She ought not to see you."

"Believe me, yes," he firmly rejoined. "None can soothe it to her as I can."

"It is the first shock that will be the worst, and I dread it for her."

He turned from Hester, put his arm on the window-frame and leaned his forehead upon it. She did not like to witness his emotion; his whole attitude bespoke despair.

"Let me see her," he resumed.

Hester reflected, and believed it might be best. For what was she—what were all to her—in comparison with William Elliot? "One promise," she said. "You are not going to talk to Mary of a continued engagement, or—a—private marriage? Excuse me, but I have heard of such things being done."

"No; I give you my honour. I have already given it to my mother. This evening is to close my intercourse with Mary; and the interview I ask for is that we may bid each other farewell. I have no alternative—none. My mother"—he paused, and a sort of shudder seemed to come over him—"my mother pointed out—that is—I would say—she exacted a promise from me that I should never marry clandestinely—without her full consent. And I gave it."

"Quite right," said Hester. "You could not have done otherwise."

"And now that they have taken this prejudice against Mary's family, to ask for consent would be fruitless. So there is no hope, and I cannot help myself. But they had better"—he lowered his voice to a whisper—"have destroyed us both, as her mother was destroyed. It would have been more merciful."

Hester went upstairs to the drawing-room and beckoned Mary out.

"Oh, aunt!" she said, "what is all this? Is anything the matter?"

"Yes, dear child, there is," answered Hester through her tears, as she fondly stroked down her hair. "I have known

it all day, and I could not tell you. William Elliot will; he is in the dining-room. Now, do not agitate yourself."

"But what is it? Are we"—she trembled excessively—"is he——"

"Go to him, my darling. It is very cruel, but he will soothe it to you better than I can." So Mary went into the room, and Mr. Elliot moved forward and closed the door behind her, while Hester paced the hall outside like a troubled ghost.

William Elliot drew Mary across the room in silence and folded her head down on to his breast and held it there.

"What is the matter?" she asked, scarcely above her breath, while she shook visibly. "My aunt said she did not know how to tell me."

"Neither do I, Mary. Yet, told it must be. Can you bear it—whatever it may be?"

"I will try to. I have borne some cruel things in my life."

"We are to be separated."

She had thought nothing less from the moment she saw her aunt's agitation. She did not speak; only raised one hand and laid it on her chest. William Elliot held the other.

"After to-night we are to be as strangers," he added. "And this is to be our last meeting on earth."

"By your own wish?" she murmured.

"Mary!"

The tone of reproof, though it was mixed with tenderness, caused her tears to come.

"Then who is doing it?"

"My father and mother."

"For what reason?"

William Elliot hesitated. "It is a prejudice they have

taken against the memory of your father; your aunt can explain it. I will not, for I do not share in it."

"And this interview is to be our last!" she moaned.

"Mary, I could have married you still, for I am my own master, and my property is sufficient to live quietly upon until I get my profession into play. But it would have been a marriage of defiance; and you, perhaps, would not enter into such."

She shook her head. "No—no."

"And so have brought down anger from on high upon us, for disobedience."

She shivered, and held up her hand for him to desist.

"Such a marriage as was my father and mother's," he continued in a whisper. "She told me so to-day. She says that a curse clung to them for years; always has clung to them; and she implored me not to bring the like upon myself. She knelt to me—Mary, do you hear?—my mother knelt to me!"

"Yes, I hear all. Poor Lady Elliot!"

"Could I refuse to promise obedience not to enter into a rebellious marriage? And my mother also worked upon my duty and affection. Though I know not, in justice to you, whether I ought to have promised."

"There was no other course," she sadly answered. "I would not have married you, William, in opposition to your parents."

"Ah, Mary! they think they have done a fine thing in separating us; they say they have acted for my welfare and happiness. That people can so delude themselves! It will cost us dear."

Her tears broke into sobs and he clasped her closer to him, their hearts beating one against the other. Let us leave them to themselves!: these sort of partings are too sacred to be touched upon.

It was quite dusk when he came out to leave, and Hester was walking about still. The hall lamp was lighted, and she saw the traces of emotion on both faces. Yes, on both; and you need not despise William Elliot for that. We do not, many of us, throughout our lives, go through such a trying interview as that had been to him.

"God bless you, dear Miss Halliwell," he said, "and thank you for the many courtesies, the kindness you have shown me. Thank you, also, for your care of Clara: I do not know whether any one else has thought to do it. I hear she is removed."

"Yes. To-day."

He wrung Hester's hand and turned again to Mary. "And God bless *you*," he added, in a whisper: "remember, Mary, what I have said. Though they have succeeded in separating us, though your path must lie one way and mine another, and we may not meet again, you will ever be first in the heart of William Elliot."

He departed; Mary disappeared; and Hester sat down in the dark room they had left. "The sins of the fathers shall be visited on the children!" she murmured to herself. "Was it ever exemplified, in any case, more plainly than in this? When Matthew Goring made love to his daughter's governess, or encouraged her to make it to him—whichever it might be—outraging his wife, outraging his children, outraging me (I, who pointed out his wicked folly to him and got ridicule from him for my pains), did he imagine that very folly would be the means hereafter of destroying his dearest child's happiness and prospects in life? No. Yet it has proved so. Oh, men! you who have wives and children, how careful should you be to tread in the right path!"

Careful indeed! and Hester Halliwell is right. A little dereliction from it may seem but a light matter, not worth

a thought, only worth the amusement of the moment, *and scarcely that:* it seemed so to Dr. Goring. Yet for him what did it bring forth? His wife's destruction; his disgraceful second marriage; his own early death; the breaking-up of his children's home, and the driving them out, orphans, into the world. And now, as it seemed, the fatality was pursuing even them! Carelessly enough does man commit sin, but when on the point of wilfully falling into it, he would do well to pause and remember that the promises of God are never broken, and that one of those promises is, "I WILL VISIT THE SINS OF THE FATHERS UPON THE CHILDREN."

BOOK THE TWELFTH.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

RIGHT AT LAST.

CHRISTMAS passed over, January passed over; and one morning in the first week in February it happened that Hester had business in town. Something arose, connected with the property of the Gorings, which rendered it necessary for her to seek an interview with the agent of Lawyer Stone, of Middlebury, who had made Dr. Goring's will. The agent was a Mr. Ecckington, living in the Temple; and Hester started the first thing after breakfast. She got into the Temple—that is, into its mazes and windings—and went about looking for Mr. Ecckington's chambers, for she had never been there but once, and did not readily remember the spot. But she reached it at last: she knew it by a neighbouring pump, whose handle was padlocked, and mounted the stairs, a great height, for he lived on the top story. She stood a minute or two to recover breath—not being able to run up seventy or eighty steps as blithely as she once could—and then turned the handle and knocked briskly at the black door. And after Hester had done that, lo! and behold! there stood some great white letters staring her in the face: "Serjeant Pyne."

Serjeant Pyne was not Mr. Ecckington, that was certain;

but before Hester had time to deliberate, a boy flung the door open. She asked for Mr. Ecckington.

"In there," said the boy, opening an inside door; and Hester entered the office.

She knew the room again directly, though its furniture was different, and she saw the tops of the pleasant green trees outside. A gentleman in a grey coat, with a pen behind his ear, rose from a desk and came forward.

"Sir," said Hester, "I am in search of Mr. Ecckington."

"Mr. Ecckington! Oh, the former occupant here. He has removed, ma'am, to chambers in Lincoln's Inn."

The gentleman gave the address — indeed, took the trouble to write it on a card—and directed her the best way to go there. Hester thanked him for his civility, which she thought extremely condescending for a serjeant, though it occurred to her afterwards that he might be only the serjeant's clerk. Hester went away, blaming Lawyer Stone's negligence in not having informed her of the removal of his agent, but had only gained the pump when her steps came to a halt, for it flashed across her mind that the address in Lincoln's Inn, just written down for her, was that of William Elliot.

She toiled up the steps again, when Serjeant Pyne (or his clerk) assured her the address was Mr. Ecckington's: he knew nothing of Mr. William Elliot.

Hester got into Lincoln's Inn, nearly losing herself, and to her dismay found that Mr. Ecckington was out. "Gone before the Master of the Rolls," the clerk said, "and might not be in till late." So all Hester could do was to go back home again and write to appoint an interview. She had proceeded but a few steps when she came in view of a young gentleman sailing towards her, in a grey wig and black gown, which flew out with the wind on all sides as he walked. It cannot be said but that Hester looked on

the wearers of these gowns with considerable awe (possibly because she had never seen much of them), and as there appeared scarcely space on the pavement for her and the gown to pass each other, Hester turned off it to give place. Imagine her astonishment when the gentleman stopped and held out his hand. She drew back, believing he mistook her for some one else.

Positively it was Lawyer Stone's son, Bob! And though Hester had nursed him many a time when he was a child, coaxed him, kissed him, and once (if it may now be confessed) whipped him, she hardly knew him in his new dignity.

"You were going to pass me," he said.

"How was I to recognize you in that fine plumage?" asked Hester. "I thought it must be nothing less than a judge coming along. So you are called!"

"Oh, thank goodness, yes; the worry's over. I'm precious glad of it."

"I went to the Temple to find Mr. Ecckington this morning and heard he had moved here," observed Hester. "Your father ought to have informed me."

"Ecckington is in Elliot's old chambers—took them off his hands," replied Mr. Stone. "Elliot gave up the law and is going to travel. He was red-hot for the Crimea, but now the war is over he would be a day too late for the fair there, so he is off somewhere else. He is up to his ears in preparations for his departure, for he purposes being abroad for years, if not for the term of his natural life—as the Bench says by our transports. Hope it may be my luck to say it some time."

"What is the cause of Mr. Elliot's going?"

"He is in tantrums with his governor. The old folks put a stopper on his marriage with—— I declare, Miss Halliwell, I beg your pardon! I forgot for the moment

how nearly you were connected with the affair. I suppose you know more than I can tell you."

"Indeed, I know very little, beyond the fact that he and my niece are separated, Robert."

"They first, Sir Thomas and the old lady," continued he, in irreverent fashion, "retracted their consent to the marriage, and then wormed an undertaking out of Elliot not to marry without. Which was like what the school-children say to their companions, when they have a cake from home and want to gormandize it all to their own cheek: 'Them as ask shan't have any; and them as don't ask don't want any.'"

The barrister laughed, and so did Hester. In spite of his fine gown, he was Bob Stone still. It set her at ease.

"So Elliot gave his word, and of course will stick to it," he resumed; "but afterwards, when he came to reflect upon the thing in cool blood, he felt that he had been harshly dealt by—tricked, in short, into promising away what we may call the subject's right of liberty. Altogether, he was disgusted with everything, threw up his profession, and means to throw up Old England. Good morning, Miss Halliwell. I'll tell the governor of his negligence when I write to Middlebury."

Now, it may sound (Hester remarked so afterwards) like a made-up incident, such as those we read of in a romance, to state that soon after parting with Mr. Stone she met William Elliot. But it was so. She was standing in the great thoroughfare, looking out for the right omnibus, when he came tearing along, pushing straight forward and looking at no one, in as much bustle as if he had all the business of the city on his shoulders. Hester caught his arm to stop him. He looked ill and careworn: her heart ached to see him.

"What is this I hear, William, about your leaving England?"

"Why remain in it?" was his answer. "What have I left to look forward to?"

"Your profession," faltered Hester.

"I have lost interest in it. Men strive to get on, not only to attain eminence, but to win a home. They think of a wife; of children; of domestic happiness. They may gain the very highest honours of the land, but, without the ties of home and heart, such distinctions are cold and valueless. So I abandon a country where hope is denied me."

"This must be as a death-blow to your father and mother!" exclaimed Hester.

"A blow I believe it is. I wish fate had been kinder to all of us."

"When do you go?"

"I leave London to-morrow night for Southampton. The steamer for Malta starts the following day. I visit the East first."

"To remain abroad—how long?"

"Probably for ever. Certainly for years."

"Oh, William!" exclaimed Hester, "if I could only persuade you to relinquish your purpose!"

He smiled—a sickly smile.

"As others have sought to persuade me—ineffectually. How is it at home? Well?"

"Not very well," replied Hester, knowing to whom he alluded. "Men can wear out regrets with bustle and travel, as you are about to do; but women, who are condemned to inactivity, retain remembrance more keenly."

"God be with you, dear Miss Halliwell!" he said, preparing to move on; "and take my dearest love and blessing to *her*. I dare say I shall never see either of you again."

He wrung her hand, in his emotion, till she thought he would have wrung it off; and a ring, which she happened to have on, cut right into her finger. But Hester was too much troubled to care for the pain. It seemed to her that Sir Thomas Elliot and his wife had much to answer for.

That same night Hester walked about her bedroom until the small hours of the morning. She was debating a question with herself. What *right*, human or divine, had Sir Thomas and Lady Elliot, in their obstinate pride and prejudice, to condemn two of their fellow-creatures to despair, even though one was the son to whom they had given birth? Did it not lie in her duty to point out to them their sin—to make an effort to awaken their own minds to it? Firmer and firmer became Hester's conviction that it was so; and when her mind was at length made up, a feeling came over her that neither her own strength nor her own spirit was urging her to it.

There was no time to let the grass grow under her feet, and the next afternoon found Hester at Sir Thomas Elliot's. Lady Elliot was pitiably subdued by sorrow, and would have given her own life to keep her son in England. Hester entered upon the matter, giving her opinion unshrinkingly; but Lady Elliot was blind to all sides of the case excepting her own, and spoke up, passionately complaining.

"No joy have I had in life; no peace; nothing but despair: before one affliction yielded to time, another arose. I had nothing left but him; nothing else to comfort me on the wide earth; and now he is going away for ever, for he is resolved not to return to England. To-night he comes to take his leave, and I shall see him for the last time."

"And thankful I am that I am not in your shoes," said Hester. "If that young man decamps into unknown regions, amongst infidels and Hottentots, and rushes into sin and everything that's bad, to drown his unhappiness,

you and his father must answer for it to his Maker, for you alone will have driven him to it."

"Oh, of course, of course," she answered, in tones of the bitterest sarcasm; "it has been my fault through life—everything; nobody's but mine. I wish it were ended!"

"I think a great deal has been your fault, Lady Elliot," rejoined Hester. "Various afflictions have come to you, *as they come to all*, and yours have not been worse than many others are. But have you striven to avert them, to turn them away? Have you been patiently submissive under them, and, accepting them as chastisements sent by God, resigned yourself fully to His good will? Have you endeavoured to make sunshine out of the blessings they have been mixed with?"

"What blessings?" asked Lady Elliot. "I know of none."

Hester gazed at her in surprise. The fact was, Lady Elliot had so accustomed herself to living a life of repining, that her mind was perverted, and she could see no good in anything.

"Does your ease count for nothing, your freedom from the cares of the world, your luxurious home?" cried Hester, as she directed her eyes round the room. "Do you forget the ample means you possess for gratifying every imaginable wish, and the golden opportunities afforded you of bestowing a tithe of your superfluous wealth upon those steeped in poverty? Above all, do you reflect how rich you are in your son? What good gifts are there, whether of person or of mind, that have not been dealt out to him with an unsparing hand? No blessings, Lady Elliot!"

"I *was* blest in him," she answered, "I was, I was! And I shall be so no more."

"Oh, Lady Elliot, how blest you might still be!" uttered Hester. "Believe me, God's mercies are given to you

abundantly. If you could only see them! If you would but consent to tear the scales from your mind and convert its gloom into sunshine! Did it ever occur to you to ask what children are bestowed on us for?"

"For our punishment," perversely answered Lady Elliot. "Mine have been."

"They were bestowed on us that we might promote their happiness here, and so lead them to heaven through their gratitude, their thankfulness of heart," said Hester. "Not that we might selfishly crush their innocent hopes and thwart their wishes, at our own caprice or pleasure, driving them into rebellion, and so on to deceit, recklessness and evil."

"Then, when my father opposed me in my wish to marry," Lady Elliot resumed, in almost sullen tones, "you would say he ought to have consented to it? Is that your argument? It is a new one."

"No, I hope such an argument is not mine. Your father was right. The objection was to Thomas Elliot: and it was not a frivolous chimera, as in your son's case. Mr. Freer thought he was not calculated to make you happy; and his worldly circumstances were against any marriage, for he possessed nothing. The error there lay with you, Lady Elliot. Your duty was to bow to your father's decision and submissively wait, hoping that time would subdue the objections. You and Thomas Elliot were both young enough."

"You seem to be pretty well acquainted with my family affairs, Miss Halliwell!

"I am not a total stranger to them. I have been for some years intimate with the Thornycrofts of Coastdown, who are relatives of the Elliot family; and I was myself once on the point of marriage with your husband's cousin, the Reverend George Archer: but I think you have heard

this before. I have had my sorrows in life, Lady Elliot, as fully as most people: sorrows of the heart, of the inward life, as also of the outer. But I have striven, by patient resignation, to make the best of them; and they are sorrows to me no more. Yours will pass away, if you so choose; and the world will become pleasant to you—always remembering to walk in it as your probation to a better. Try it, Lady Elliot."

"Try what?"

"To make your own happiness; to make your husband's, *which you have never yet heartily striven to do;* to make your son's. You will live to thank me for having suggested it."

Lady Elliot burst into tears and laid her head on the sofa cushion. And at that moment Sir Thomas Elliot appeared at the door and stood quietly rooted to it, in surprise. Lady Elliot, from her position, could not see him, and Hester pretended not to. She thought it well that he should hear a bit of her mind, as well as his wife.

"William is going forth into exile," she resumed to Lady Elliot, "a lonely, miserable man: he voluntarily separates himself from you. Would he do this if you were true to him, a loving mother? And you, what will remain to you after his departure? Discontented repining, bitter self-reproach, a yearning for him whom you cannot then bring back. You say that a curse—though, I assure you, I shrink from repeating such a word—has followed you through life, follows you still. Break it, Lady Elliot!"

Lady Elliot raised her head and looked at Hester.

"Keep William by you, a son to rejoice in and be proud of. Let him make his own happiness and help him in it: take an interest in his plans, in his profession, and be to him a tender friend. Diffuse a pleasant spirit in your home: make the best of poor Clara, and win back the affections of

your husband, as you strove to win them in your girlhood: and, above all, cherish in your heart a spirit of thankfulness to ONE who has put all these blessings in your way, a repentant, submissive, hopeful spirit—and none were ever submissive to Him in vain. Where would the curse be then? Gone, Lady Elliot."

"If I could think—if I could think it has been, in a measure, my own fault, in thus encouraging a murmuring spirit of rebellion!" she wailed, clasping her hands in intense anguish. "Oh! if I *could* change this black despair for peace! If I could indeed retain William at my side! If I could find happiness in what has been a thankless home!"

"I'll help you," cried Sir Thomas, coming forward. "If you will only manage to keep William in his own country and give us a bit of cheerfulness at home, instead of gloom, I will do my part towards it."

He looked, as he spoke, more like the merry Tom Elliot of her girlhood than he had done for years. Hope leaped up into Hester's heart; she thought she saw her way becoming clear, and she explained the purport of her visit to Sir Thomas.

"In point of family, Mary Goring's is not inferior to yours; and you and I, Sir Thomas, only narrowly escaped being cousins in early life."

"Through George Archer, the booby!" uttered Sir Thomas. "You would have saved him, Miss Halliwell."

"And—you will pardon me for stating it, Sir Thomas—when I and George Archer were once jestingly comparing notes as to our relative importance, my family, in point of descent and connections, was found to be superior to his and yours. Believe me, though you have risen in the world, Mary Goring's descent is quite equal to William Elliot's."

"But it was not Miss Goring's family we objected to," returned the knight.

"Oh yes, it was, in reality," said Hester. "Again I say, excuse my speaking freely, Sir Thomas; the subject justifies it. You and Lady Elliot were mortified because William did not choose a wife from the higher ranks of life. You stated to me, Sir Thomas, that, personally, you estimated Miss Goring highly."

"I do," he answered.

"And you cannot, you, a sensible man, believe that Dr. Goring was guilty. It is impossible that you can do so, if you have dispassionately examined into the details of the affair. Imprudent he was; infatuated; nothing more—and he paid the penalty. Do you think, if he had indeed committed a crime so awful and upon my own sister, that I would come here to excuse him, to protest there was no stain on his character? No, Sir Thomas. I have my own high and responsible duties in life to perform; and I would not say or do a thing that my conscience disapproves of. When I assert Matthew Goring's innocence, I assert what I believe to be as true as that there is a heaven above us."

He made no reply.

"Think not I come here, as a petitioner, to urge my niece's claims, or to protest against her wrongs. Though the wrong, allow me to say, Lady Elliot, was forced upon her by your side, not sought on mine, for it was you who deliberately suffered the intimacy between her and William to grow up."

Sir Thomas nodded his head approvingly. No danger that he would gainsay that.

"No," resumed Hester, "I came here with no selfish motives, but because it was essential that some one should point out to you both how grievously you were erring; and I believed the task was allotted to me. To drive William

away from his country and destroy his prospects in life, is a heavy sin to lie at your door. How will you atone for it?"

Sir Thomas Elliot began pacing the room with uneasy strides. Presently he spoke, but in a reluctant tone.

"Since I first heard of the affair at Middlebury, I have learnt more of its particulars. And I confess I now think it probable that Dr. Goring was—so far as regarded his wife's death—an innocent man."

"Then act upon it, Sir Thomas," cried Hester, briskly. "Stop your son's voyage now, at the eleventh hour, and restore things to their former footing."

"Louisa, what do you say?" he asked of his wife. "I told you, once before, that in this affair I would abide by your decision."

"I do not know what to say," sobbed Lady Elliot. "If I could think——"

"Think that you are going to be happier than you have been for many years," interrupted Hester. "Think that your dear son, whom you grieve as lost to you, will remain at home to comfort you with his love: think of the merry romps you will have with his children: and when the time arrives that you are on your dying bed, Lady Elliot, think that he will be at its side to bless you, instead of beyond your reach, thousands of miles, over the wide sea."

She rose from the sofa, and the tears were streaming down her cheeks, as she held out her hand to Hester. "Miss Halliwell, you have conquered. Thomas," she added, turning to her husband, "we may have done wrong to William. Let us repair it."

"With all my heart," he replied. "Anything is preferable to the gloom which has latterly overhung the house. Miss Halliwell, we have to thank you for this. But if we are really to turn over a new leaf and look out for—what was it?—sunbeams, you must come often and repeat your

lessons; otherwise, we may forget the way and lapse back again."

"Oh yes, I will be sure to come. But I do not think you will do that now. And I assure you, Sir Thomas Elliot, I never felt so proud in my life. To think that my poor, homely pleading has effected this great purpose! But it was not mine. There was ONE, greater than we are, who put it into my heart to come, and has helped me through with it."

They pressed Hester to stay to—she did not hear whether it was tea or dinner. The latter, she thought; but if so, it must have been kept waiting a considerable time, for it was long past seven o'clock. Not she. She was too anxious to reach home and impart the joyful news to Mary Goring.

Sir Thomas sat down by his wife as Hester left the room.

"I will do my part towards it all, Loo," he whispered: "on the old faith of Tom Elliot. Here's my hand upon it."

She smiled pleasantly, and put her hand into his.

"Oh, Thomas," she said, "we have both been wrong, all these years—I see it all—and I more wrong than you. Let us forget and forgive, and try to make life pleasant to each other."

His smile echoed hers, and he leaned forward and kissed her. The first happy smile, the first voluntary kiss, they had exchanged for years.

"I think it seems as though the curse were gone," she murmured, the rich glow of hope lighting her cheek.

"I never believed there was one," smiled Sir Thomas, "except in your imagination. What may have seemed like it we brought daily upon ourselves."

"By not making the best of things," she eagerly answered. "Oh yes: it was so."

As Hester was passing the dining-room door, Clara Elliot saw her, and, with a scream of delight, ran out, jumping

around her like a little dog. Poor child! her mind was no stronger than it ever had been. But that it should be so there was no hope. Miss Graves looked out also, very much astonished to see who was the visitor. Hester did not explain.

"Why do I never go to your house?" Clara exclaimed. "It is such a long time! Why don't you send Mary to see me?"

"Mary has been very ill, my dear," answered Hester. "She cannot go out now."

"Mary ill! Let me come and see her to-morrow."

"Yes, dear child, you shall," interrupted Lady Elliot, advancing. "And I will go with you. Oh, Miss Halliwell!" she whispered, shaking Hester once more by the hand, "I think you are right. You don't know what a load is taken off my heart!"

As Hester left the street-door, who should be stepping out of a cab but William Elliot. She waited whilst he paid the cabman, and then took him by surprise.

"I have just left your father and mother."

"Indeed!" he said, looking almost incredulous. "This is my farewell evening with them, Miss Halliwell. I go down by the night train."

"So you persist in leaving England?"

"I sail to-morrow."

"Now, which would you rather do, William?" cried she. "Go abroad in that horrid steamer—no disparagement to it in particular, but all steamers are horrid—from which you will wish yourself out again before you have been a couple of hours at sea, or stop at home and marry Mary Goring?"

"Oh," he evasively answered, whilst the red colour flushed into his face, "I am so overwhelmed with preparations for the start, that I can think of nothing else just now."

"But just ask yourself the question: *and answer it as you will.*"

There was something in Hester's tone which struck him even more forcibly than the words. He grasped her by the shoulder—what *did* she mean?

"Go in, dear William," whispered Hester. "I have paved the way for you with Sir Thomas and Lady Elliot. I think if you do prefer Mary to the steamer, you may have her."

Hester never knew whether she reached home on her head or her heels. A dilatory omnibus, given to stopping, took her, but she herself was not clear upon the point. Lucy exclaimed at her long absence, and inquired if she had taken tea.

"No. I should like a cup."

She took a light and went upstairs to the best bedroom, which had been given up to Mary for the illness which had followed the breaking of her engagement. She had fallen into a doze, as she lay on the sofa. Quietly taking off her own cloak and bonnet, Hester sat down by her. Nothing of Mary could be seen but her face, for she had wrapped a shawl round her and some one had thrown a covering over her feet. Her brow was contracted as with pain, and her mouth stood slightly open—often the case in illness—but the young face, in spite of its whiteness, was lovely still.

"We will soon have that fair brow smooth again, my child," thought Hester, as she gently stirred the fire into a blaze.

Presently Hester heard a noise as of talking, downstairs. It mounted to the drawing-room adjoining; and then Lucy appeared, carrying the cup of tea. But Hester rose from her seat in amazement, for stealing in after her was William Elliot.

"The idea of his coming down to-night," thought

Hester. "And how quickly he must have followed upon me!"

"I could not help it," Lucy whispered to her in a tone of apology. "He would see Mary, and when I urged that she was in her bedroom, he said what did that matter? Oh, Hester! he says she is to be his wife, after all!"

The bustle awoke Mary, and the hectic flushed into her cheek when consciousness fully returned to her. She would have risen, but William Elliot prevented it. He was shocked to terror at the change he saw in her, and, as he told Hester afterwards, believed her to be dying. He leaned over her with gentle tenderness, and his hot tears fell on her face.

"Oh, Mary!" he whispered, as he laid his cheek to hers; "I see how ill you have been, but you must bear up, for my sake. Our separation is over, my darling: my mother will be here to-morrow to tell you so. Very soon, very soon, you will be all mine."

"But what about the steamer, William?" asked Hester in the gladness of her heart, pretending to be very serious.

"The steamer must go without me."

"But your preparations—your outfit and your great trunks? Are they to be wasted?"

"I will give them to you if you like, Aunt Hester," quoth he. "I am in a generous mood."

"And go back to the law again?" she questioned.

"Of course. Hoping, in time, to lord it over you all on the woolsack. Who knows but I may?"

Hester snatched a moment to drink her tea. Mary, always thirsty now, glanced at it with longing eyes. Then William Elliot pleaded for some, to put him in mind of old times, he said, and convince him he was not dreaming. Next, Lucy thought she should like a cup, instead of supper. So they had the round table drawn before Mary's sofa, and

actually, as Hester expressed it, held a tea-party in the bedroom. She said she hoped no one would reproach her with its being improper. When Frances Goring came in from the schoolroom to say good night, there they were seated at it, with a pile of buttered toast before them; and Frances looked as though she never meant to recover from her astonishment. She stood just inside the room, staring at William Elliot.

"Ah, Frances! how do you do?" he said, holding out his hand.

But Miss Frances, like the schoolgirl she was, stood immovable.

"What have you come again for, Mr. Elliot?" she brought out.

"I? To have another of your aunt's housekeeping lessons," he merrily answered. "Touching the apple-tarts and legs of mutton, you know. She must give it to me especially, to-night. Mary is too ill."

"And are you coming again—other nights?"

"I hope so."

"Oh!" cried Frances, clasping her hands, "I am so glad! It seems like those famous evenings come back again. If you could only make Mary well, as she was then!"

"I'll try to," said William Elliot.

Hester went downstairs with him when he was leaving.

"You see how ill she looks," whispered Hester. "Do not set your heart too steadfastly upon her."

"Change of prospects will do much for her," was his reply; "and change of air may do the rest. She shall have that with me."

"With you, William!"

"Yes. And you know what that must imply," he returned, with a smile of very decided meaning. "So, if the former preparations are done away with, dear Miss

Halliwell, you had best set about some more with to-morrow's dawn. We have suffered too much to risk another separation, and I promise you that, ill or well, Mary Goring shall soon be Mary Elliot."

Lady Elliot came the next day, and burst into tears when she saw Mary: like her son, she was deeply shocked. Clara would not go away again, so Lady Elliot left her to remain a day or two.

However, as William Elliot had said, change of prospects seemed to do wonders for Mary. Her recovery was rapid, not all at once to robust health, but sufficiently so to remove their fears. The wedding was fixed for the last week in April. Hester wished to defer it until the Midsummer holidays, when the house would be free and Mary stronger, but William Elliot banteringly inquired if she would not prefer to defer it till Midsummer two years. And the Rev. Alfred Halliwell took a long journey across country to marry them, as he had once before taken a journey to marry her unfortunate mother. He was going to allow himself a fortnight's holiday, that is, from the Monday till the next Saturday week, a friend taking his duty for him on the intervening Sunday, and Mr. Dewisson's curate taking the week-day services. Previously to this, his son George had sailed again as third officer, in a far better ship and service than the last. He now liked his profession, and was happy in it, and would no doubt get on in time.

They had a jolly wedding, as Alfred Goring expressed it. Lady Elliot wore a dazzling dress of satin and gold, which caused every eye in church to water, and threw Mary's white silk quite into the shade. Frances Goring was bridesmaid, thereby acquiring an unlimited amount of vanity, which she has never since lost.

Hester never could tell how she comported herself at the

wedding breakfast, excepting that it was very badly. She took the head of the table, having Sir Thomas Elliot on her right hand and Mr. Pepper, a grey-haired gentleman, in gold spectacles and heavy gold chain, on the left. The clergyman was at the foot of the table, having the bride and bridegroom on one side of him and Lady Elliot on the other. Sir Thomas made merry over Hester's nervous mistakes, and kept every one alive with laughter. He seemed quite to have returned to the free and open manners of his youth; and Hester felt certain that he *was* doing his part of the bargain, as he had promised Lady Elliot. It is probable they both felt, as they looked around, that Mary Goring's connections were not so very despicable, after all, or so far removed from their own position. Looking down upon the numerous guests was the portrait of Mary's ancestor, the Lady Hester Halliwell. Wonderfully, with years, had Hester grown like it. Strangers, calling, often thought it was Hester's portrait, and that she had dressed herself in the old style of George the Second to have it taken. Lady Elliot looked happy too—really happy, as Hester had never seen her look until lately. Miss Graves was in high feather, and sat next to Alfred, whom she kept in order, at the request of Hester. She had not gone to church, having remained with Clara, for they had not ventured to take the latter. Poor Clara! she was dressed as splendidly as her mother, laughed by starts all breakfast-time, and nearly had one of her eating-fits, but William Elliot had her by his side and restrained her. Jessie Pepper and little Jane Goring were also present: as to the other pupils and the teachers, they had a whole holiday and quite a banquet to themselves; so every one was pleased, and the day passed off delightfully.

They left early in the afternoon, the bride and bridegroom in one of Sir Thomas Elliot's carriages for the London Bridge Station, intending to reach Dover that evening and

France the following day; purposing to remain on the Continent all the summer, and perhaps the autumn. "It will restore Mary," William Elliot had said, "and we both deserve a holiday." Meanwhile, Lady Elliot and Hester had promised to occupy themselves with furnishing and arranging their new residence, William especially charging Hester to see to the appointing of the housekeeping department. Hester was the last to shake hands with him in the hall, whilst Sir Thomas was handing Mary to the carriage.

"You will take care of her, William?" whispered Hester, the tears falling from her eyes, and she calling them "tiresome" for doing so. "She cannot be said to be well or strong yet."

"You know there is no need to give me the injunction," William Elliot answered, whilst the ingenuous flush stole into his face, the sweet, earnest look to his truthful eye. "When I bring Mary home again, she will be so improved you will none of you recognize her." And Hester felt that his words were likely to be verified.

Late in the evening, when all had dispersed, the two sisters and their brother sat round the fire. They had not so sat, alone, for many, many years. "And," Mr. Halliwell said, remarking upon it, "we may never so sit again."

Hester told him the story of Lady Elliot, how she had been aroused from her grumbling and sinful discontent: that every day she had again fervently thanked Hester for awaking her to hope and to peace in life.

"She should have had half the trials to endure that have fallen to my lot," exclaimed the clergyman.

"Do you know what I have often thought of?" remarked Lucy, "often and often. That theory of Aunt Copp's—that because our father heedlessly risked his money and lost it, not because he was poor, but to increase his riches

when he had already plenty, leaving us almost destitute, we, his children, should have to wrestle with hard fate through life. Do you remember her saying it, Alfred? do you, Hester?"

They nodded.

"It has proved tolerably true with most of us," said Mr. Halliwell. "But God has been very good to us, for—thanks be unto Him!—our trials might have been so much greater; and lately they have been considerably lessened. Sorrows are the necessary evils of mortality, but we can well endure them when we look to that better land of rest which they are fitting us for. Many whose outward lot is cast in brightness make sorrow for themselves. Look at what you say of Lady Elliot."

"Oh yes," interrupted Hester; "indeed, we have MUCH to be thankful for. Brighter days are come upon us all than we once hoped for; and I trust our hearts have been so purified that we may 'endure to the end.' But I wish I could arouse the world to a healthy state of mind, as I was humbly instrumental in arousing that of Lady Elliot."

I wish she could. For let every one of God's creatures be fully assured that they possess within themselves the power to make or mar, in a great measure, their own happiness here; *that upon the state of the mind and heart depends life's sunshine.*

THE END.

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